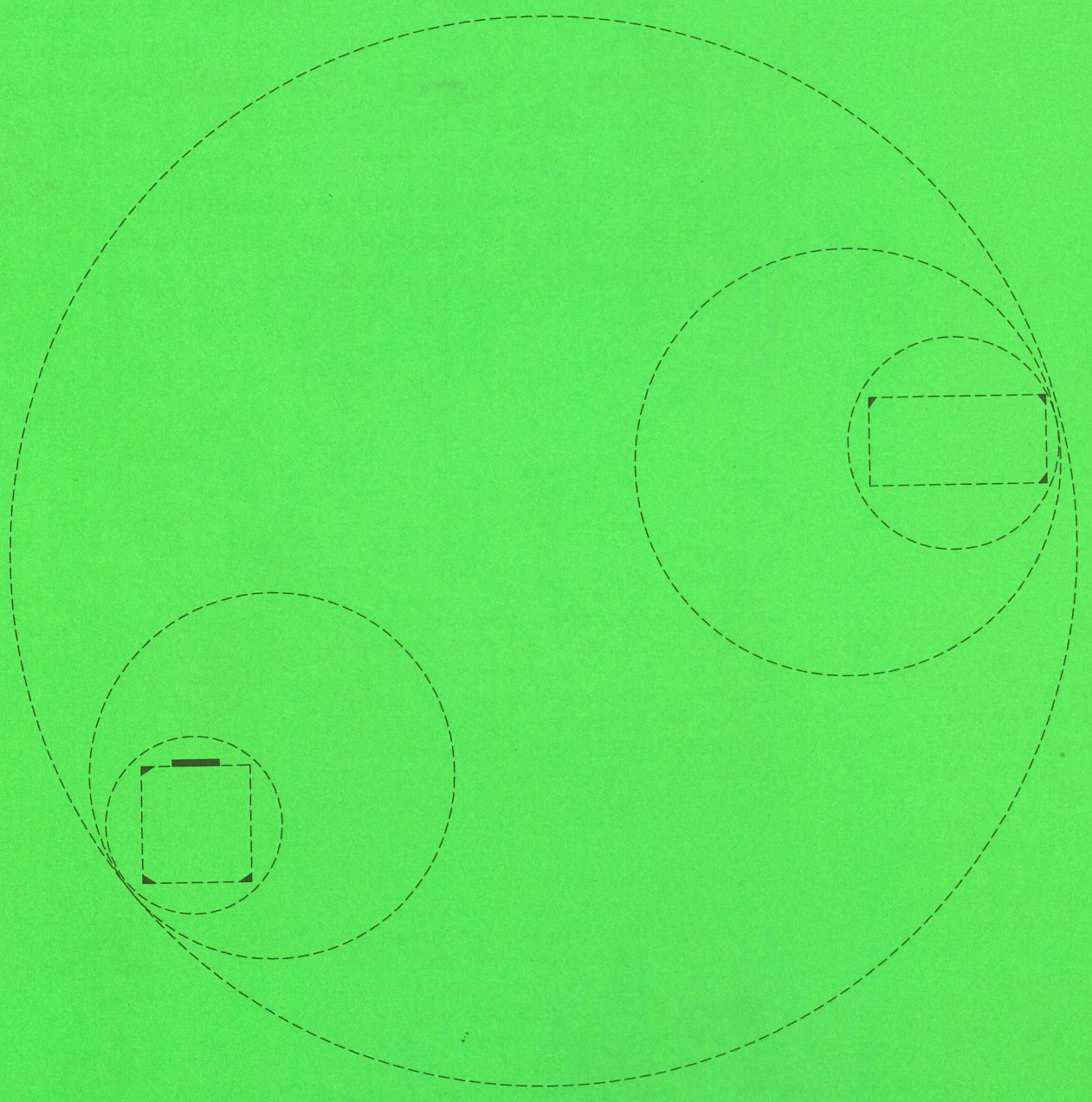
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Domestic Orbits

Frida Escobedo



Domestic Orbits

Frida Escobedo

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"If anything is described by an architectural plan, it is the nature of human relationships, since the elements whose trace it records —walls, doors, windows and stairs—are employed first to divide and then selectively to reunite inhabited space. But what is generally absent in even the most elaborately illustrated building is the way human figures will occupy it."

—Robin Evans

DOMESTIC ORBITS.
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VOICES SPINNING OFF THE ORBIT. TESTIMONIALS FROM THREE DOMESTIC WORKERS.
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According to official records, there are more than 2.4 million domestic workers in Mexico, 90% of whom are women. Almost all lack basic labor rights. They are employed without contracts, paid vacations, or health insurance; they work longer daily hours than the law dictates; they are paid less than minimum wage; they work weekends. Exacerbating the absence of rights and deepening this system of exploitation, a significant number of Mexican domestic workers still work *de planta*; that is, they live in the same house where they work.

Frida Escobedo's *Domestic Orbits* its a speculative essay of critical cartography, exploring how the domestic space is configured around orbits of exclusion that shape domestic workers' lives and trajectories. How is space articulated according to specific gendered, classist, racist configurations of the social?

Organized through a series of Mexico City-based case studies built between the 1950s and into the present day, *Domestic Orbits* examines the different scales on which domestic labor is erased by architects and planners. It reads the architectural plans of five well-known projects in Mexico City—Fernando Romero's Torre Cervantes, Luis Barragán's Home Studio, Mario Pani's Varsovia Condominium, the anonymously designed 71 Anatole France, and the residential development Bosque Real—from a perspective that aims to highlight the relationships at work between social and economic forces.

Domestic work has the distinctive characteristic that is only recognized and visible when it's not done. In this sense, *Domestic Orbits* sketches a counter-history of modern Mexican architecture that questions the duality between the visible and the invisible, between those who count and those who don't.

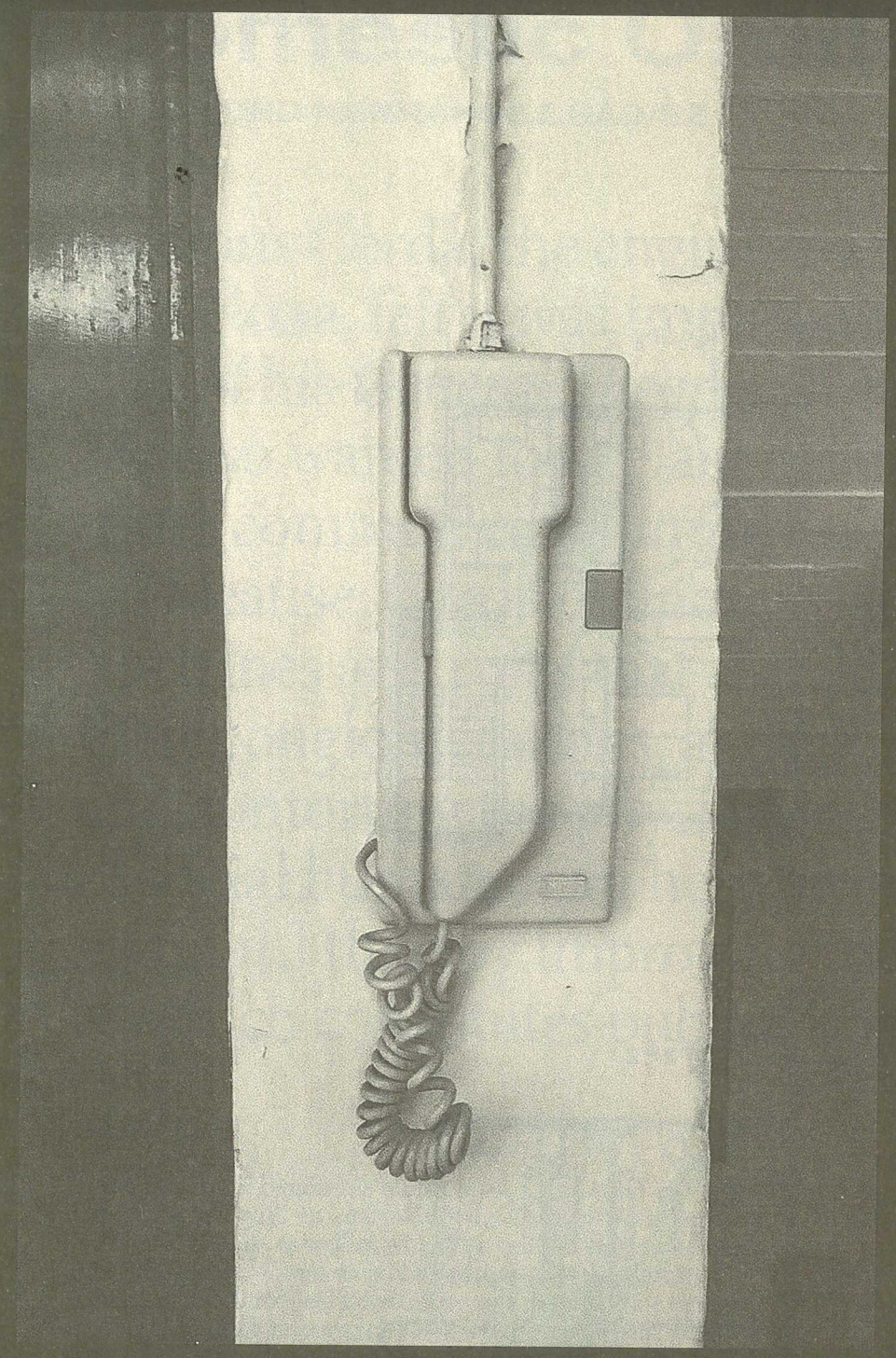
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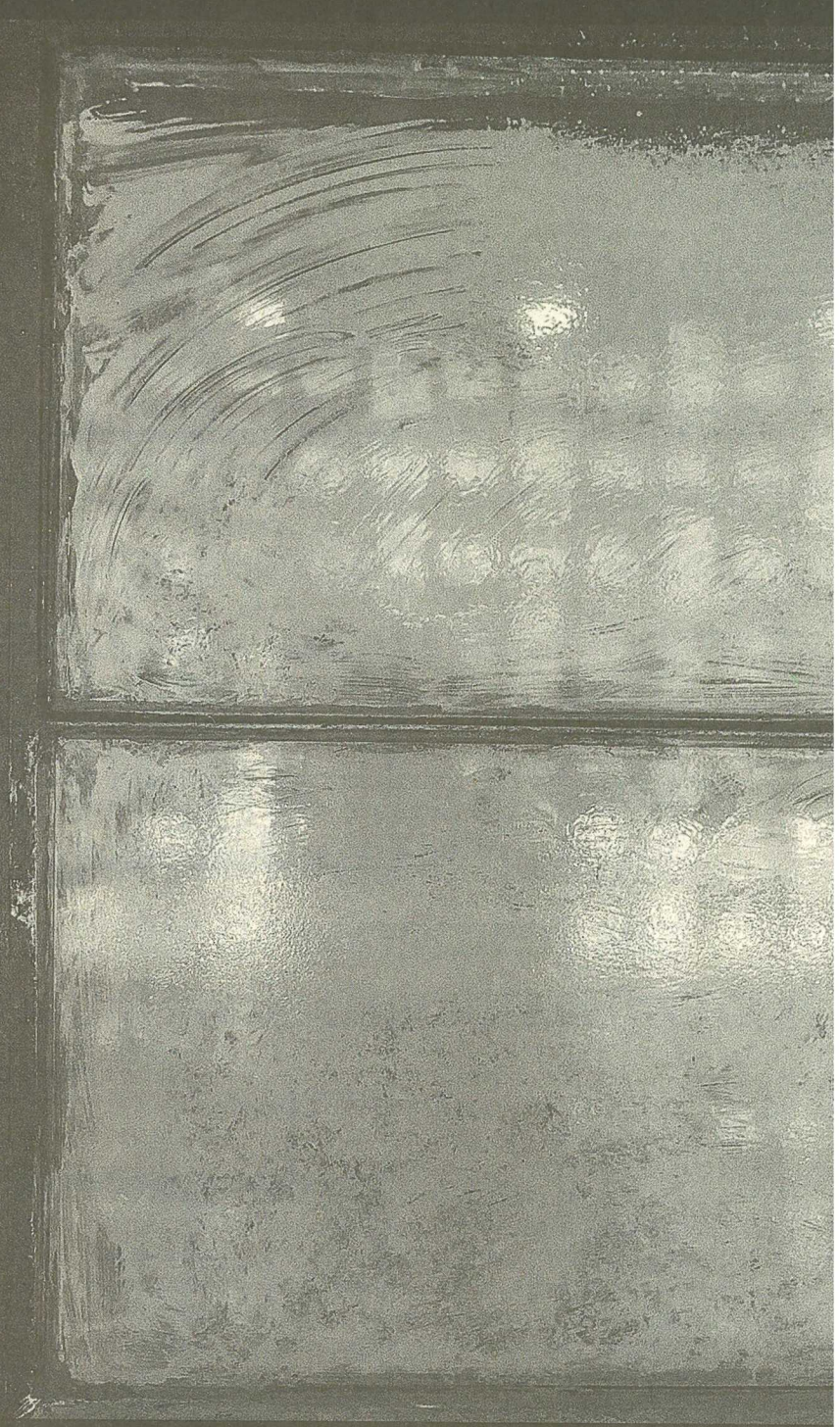
Frida Escobedo
Is principal and founder of an architecture and design studio based in Mexico City. She is the recipient of the 2014 BIAU Prize, the 2016 Architectural Review Emerging Architecture Award, the 2017 Architectural League Emerging Voices and the 2018 RIBA International Fellowship. In addition to her practice Frida has taught at Columbia Universit's Graduate School of Architecture, Planning and Preservation; Harvard Graduate School of Design; The Architectural Association, London; University of California, Berkeley and RICE University, Houston.

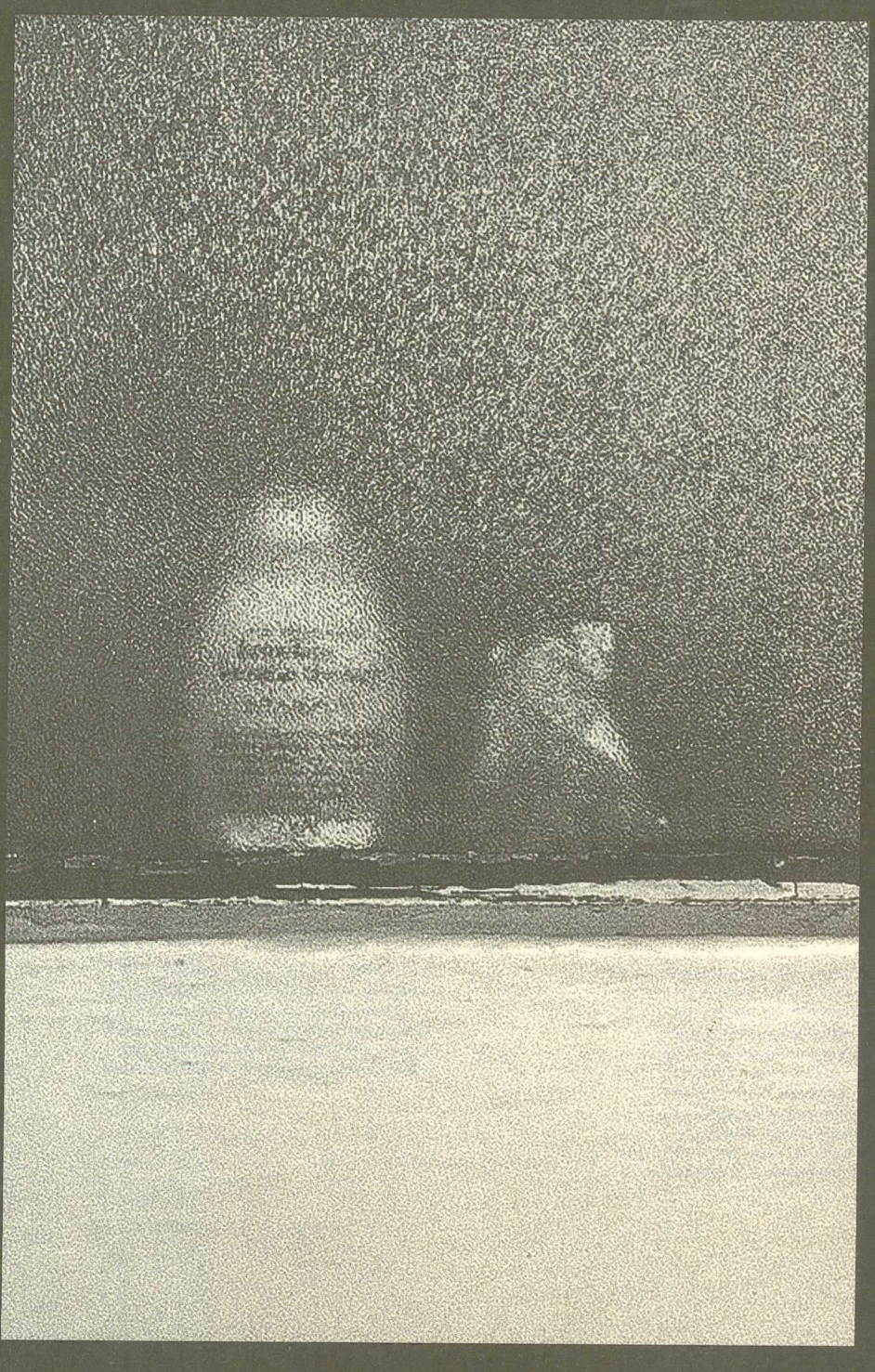
Sindicato Nacional de Trabajadoras del Hogar (Sinactraho)
The National Union of Workers and Domestic Workers (Sinactraho) is the first union formed at a national level in the face of the need of the sector to seek the defense of labor human rights, non-discrimination, eradication of labor and gender violence, the economic and social valuation of our work, as well as the improvement of our quality of life, for those who carry out paid household work in Mexico. Thus, on August 30, 2015, about one hundred domestic workers, from the states of Puebla, Colima, Chiapas, the State and Mexico City, we constitute the first National Union of domestic workers in the history of our country, as well as being led by us domestic workers. Lourdes Hernández Hernández (San Miguel Topilejo, Mexico City), Emilia Orihuela Gómez (San José Villa de Allende, Mexico State), and Silvia Lázaro Cruz (Nochixtlan, Oaxaca).

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Mauricio Patrón Rivera
(Mexico City, 1984) is an artist of the text and its relation with the community. His work travels through decolonial feminism, necropolitics, human rights and journalism. The output of his work are curatorial projects, academic research, essays and collaborative processes. He is currently studying a PhD in Creative Writing in Spanish at Houston University.







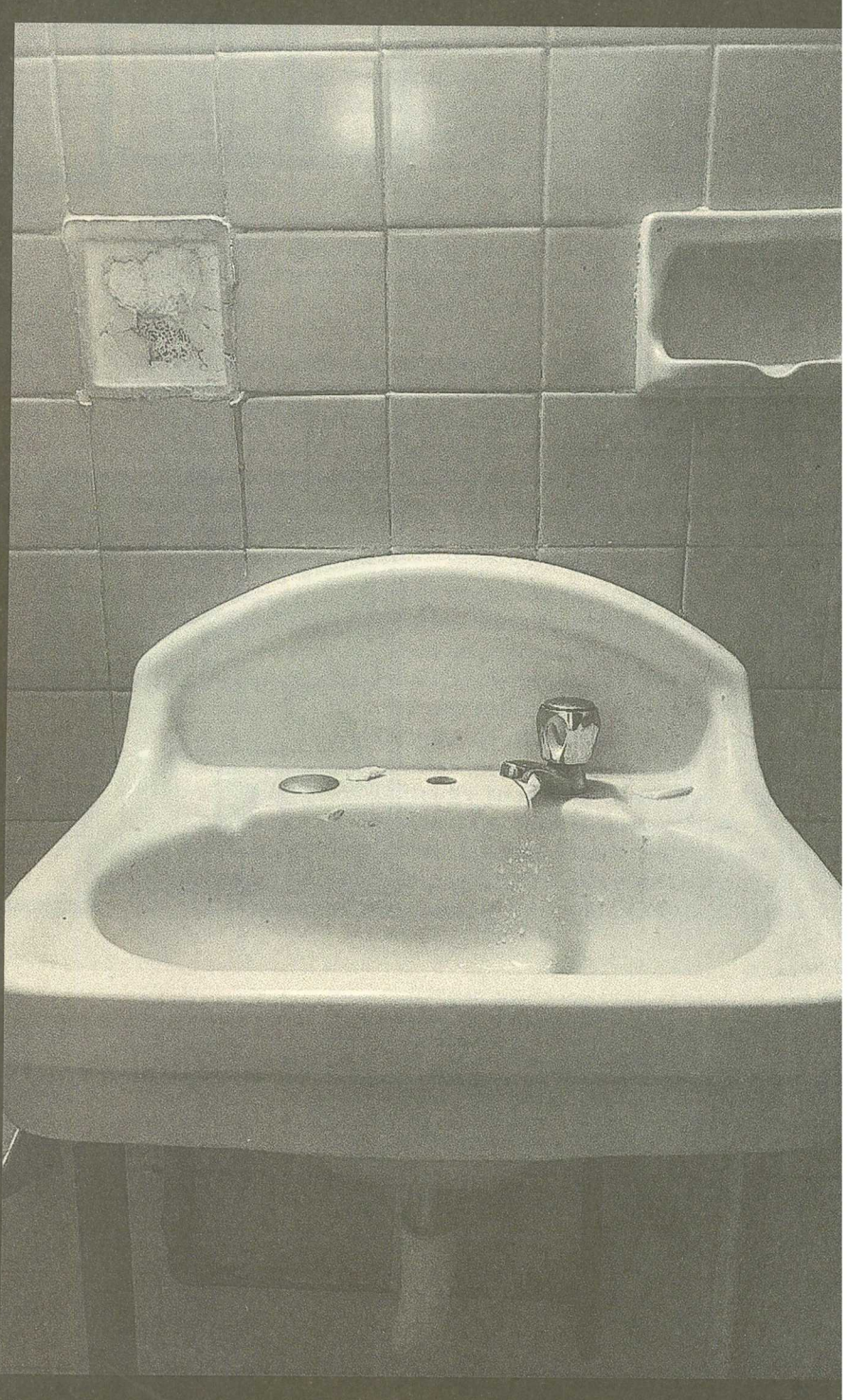
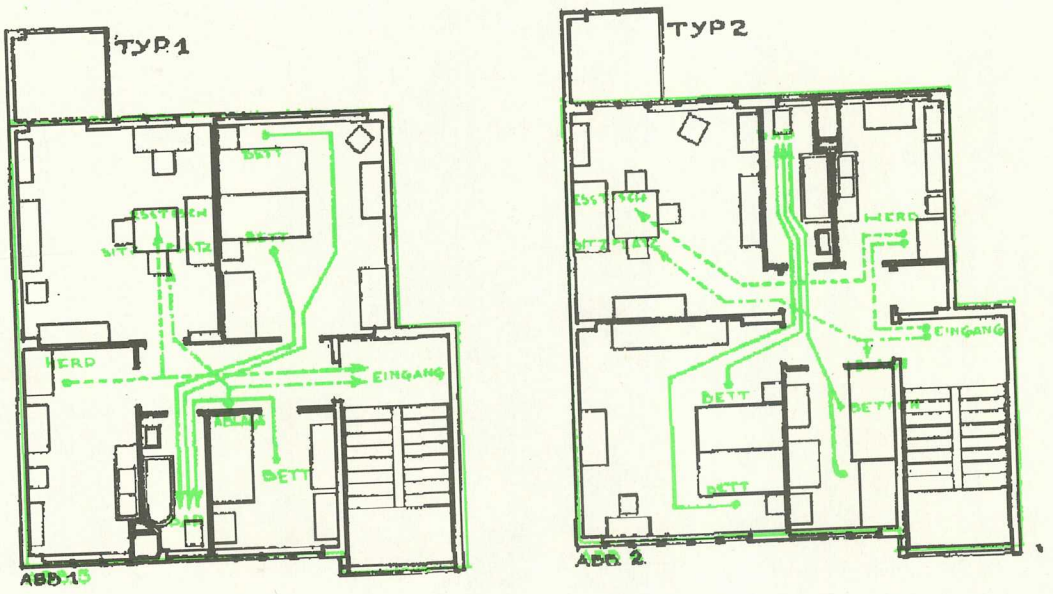
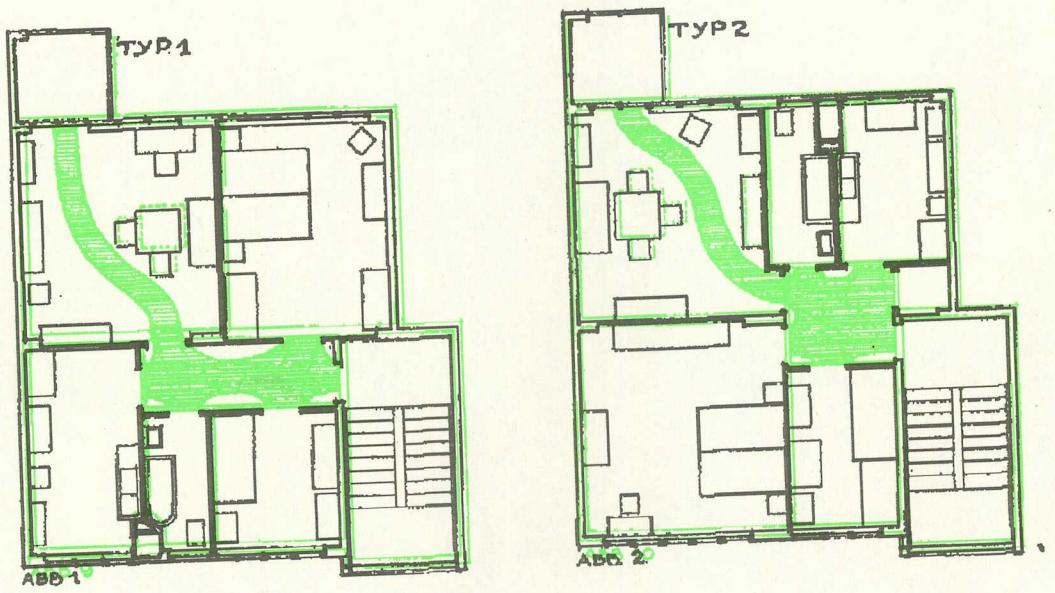
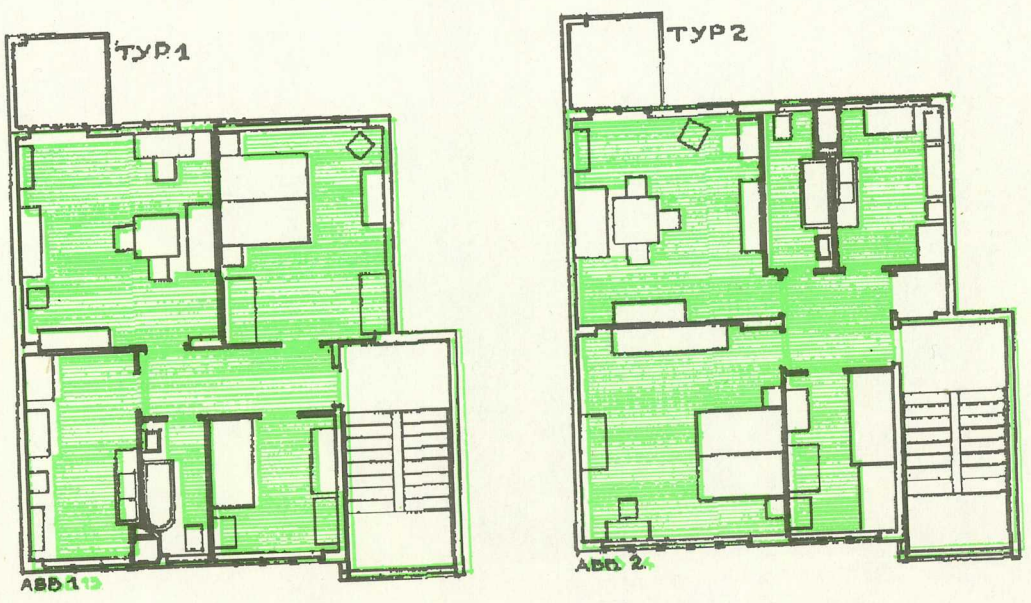


Fig. 1
Klein, Alexander. "Grundrissbildung und Raumgstaltung von Kleinwohnungen und neue Auswertungsmethoden," in *Zentralblatt der Bauverwaltung,* issues 34 and 35, (Spanish translation: Klein, Alexander, Vivienda mínima: 1906-1957, Gustavo Gili, Barcelona, 1980).







Domestic Orbits

ALEJANDRO HERNÁNDEZ GÁLVEZ

Ildefons Cerdà, the engineer who designed the expansion of Barcelona, felt it was important to explain the neologism in the title of his *General Theory of Urbanization*,[1] published in 1867. He also wanted to explain his use of the word urb instead of the more common city, burgh, town, village, hamlet. At the start of his treatise, Cerdà defines urbanization as "the set of principles, doctrines and rules that should be applied so that buildings and their conglomerations, as opposed to constricting, distorting and contorting the physical, moral and intellectual faculties of social humans, can help promote their development and vitality[,] thereby improving individual wellbeing, the sum total of which constitutes public prosperity."

Circuits

Ross Exo Adams begins his recent book, *Circulation and Urbanization*,[2] with an analysis of why Cerdà prefers the term *urb* over *city*, as well as why he uses other terms like *urbanization* and *locomotion*. Rather than treating the *city* as a politically defined and determined space, Cerdà saw the *urb* as the result of an organizational and managerial process: a process, indeed, of *urbanization*. Adams writes: "The space he imagined gains resolution not so much as a formal entity, but rather as a continuous, expansive space-process governed by this new administrative-legal totality." And he also stresses, without discrediting what was radical about Cerdà's approach, that his theories were shaped by an evolving perception of concepts ranging from the body itself (with William Harvey's *discovery* of blood circulation in the seventeenth century) to population and territory.

Like Cerdà, Haussmann, in his equally radical transformation of Paris, sought to prioritize circulation, a continuous flow. Movement became a domestic matter, too: a visible preoccupation inside the home. In issues 34 and 35 of the German weekly periodical *Zentralblatt der Bauverwaltung*,[3] (Fig. 1) published in August 1928, the architect Alexander Klein contributed a text called "Development of floor plans and the organization of space in small dwellings and new methods of assessment." His ideas are based on two premises: that human beings are a combination of body and soul and that "the dwellings that have been built thus far do not adequately fulfill the spiritual needs of their inhabitants." Klein then explains that "we are all aware of the pernicious affects produced in our organism" by certain substances, but "very few of us are concerned about the beneficial influence that a favorable environment may exercise on our psychic state" and physical being. He then states that a house must be conceived "in such a way that it maintains an active and organic relationship with the living conditions and cultural needs of the present day, which means it must satisfy the demands for economy and simplicity." In short, he concludes, a living space "must make life easier for us." To ensure that a "minimal dwelling"—the primary subject of his essay—succeeds in simplifying its inhabitants' lives, Klein advocates for a "systematic" approach. He thus addresses the "technical aspects of the dwelling": bathroom, kitchen, closets, the depth of the bedrooms, heating, positioning, and proportions. Klein studies the measurements and arrangement of the different spaces in a house and proposes a graphic method that "provides a scientific procedure for comparing and evaluating the floors of homes." Among the objectives of his diagrams was "to definitively illustrate the possibility of the dwelling's rational organization and simple use in relation to the expenditure of physical energy," and, moreover, to "avoid the loss of surface area due to spaces that must be left open for movement." In her book *Modern Housing*, published in 1934, Catherine Bauer writes that Klein had "studied the actual movements and daily requirements of families" and that his floor plans "probably represent the most thorough rationalization of dwelling-space according to *use* which has yet been achieved." Bauer reprints one of Klein's diagrams under the title *Functional Housing for Frictionless Living*.[4] *Frictionless* living enables uninterrupted movement.

Among nineteenth-century urbanists' primary concerns was how to guarantee not only the movement of people and vehicles bearing different loads, but also the flows that began to nourish the life of *modern* urbs—as well as the waste produced by that *organism*. Cerdá made street section drawings that differentiated the pavement from the stream at ground-level; beneath the pavement, too, he showed the connections to the drainpipes. These two levels of circulation—on the surface, people and vehicles; below ground, the drainage system, thus separating a visible space from another strictly service-oriented one—had appeared since the eighteenth century in the section drawings made by the French architect Pierre Patte. Even before then, too, they were present in the work of the Portuguese military engineer Eugénio dos Santos as he planned the reconstruction of Lisbon after the earthquake of 1755. This differentiation between circuits, so to speak, also has a domestic equivalent. In 1978, the architectural historian Robin Evans published an essay titled "Figures, Doors and Passages."[5] Evans writes about Klein's diagrams in reference to the title Bauer had assigned them: *housing for frictionless living*. Evans

1. Cerdà, Ildefons. *Teoría General de la Urbanización y aplicación de sus principios y doctrinas a la Reforma y Ensanche de Barcelona*, Vol. I, Imprenta Española, Madrid, 1867. English translation: https://issuu.com/actar/docs/generaltheoryorurbanization1867
2. Adams, Ross Exo. *Circulation and Urbanization*, SAGE, 2019.
3. Klein, Alexander. "Grundrissbildung und Raumgstaltung von Kleinwohnungen und neue Auswertungsmethoden," in Zentralblatt der Bauverwaltung, issues 34 and 35, consulted online: https://digital.zlb.de/viewer/image/14688302_1928/1/LOG_0003/ (Spanish translation: Klein, Alexander, *Vivienda mínima: 1906-1957*, Gustavo Gili, Barcelona, 1980).
4. Bauer, Catherine. *Modern Housing*, Houghton Mifflin Company, Riverside Press, Cambridge, 1934.
5. Evans, Robin. "Figures, Doors and Passages," *Architectural Design*, Vol. 48, No. 4, April 1978. Revisited in Evans, Robin. *Translations from Drawing to Building and Other Essays*, MIT Press, Cambridge, 1997.

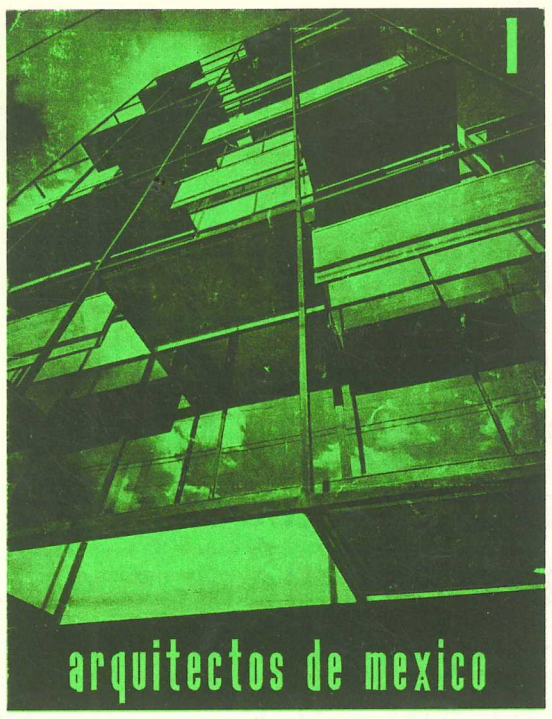


Fig. 2

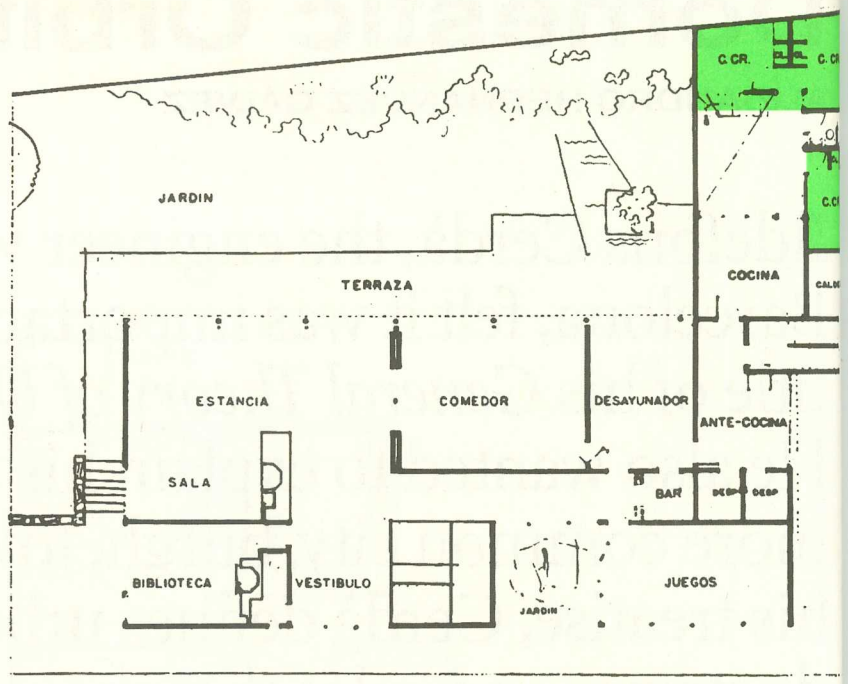


Fig. 3

interpreted this label as a hidden metaphor, one suggesting "that all accidental encounters caused friction and therefore threatened the smooth running of the domestic machine." Evans begins his essay by stating, "If anything is described by an architectural plan, it is the nature of human relationships." He proceeds to explain certain kinds of relationships in conjunction with the floor plan attributed to Rafael Sanzio for the Villa Madama, commissioned by Cardinal Giulio de' Medici in the early sixteenth century. The strict social hierarchy and protocol that accompanied it weren't physically incorporated into the construction, in which the various rooms were often directly connected. According to Evans, social relationships and their effects on spatial organization changed with the development of corridors and hallways: passages "used as a device for removing traffic." Devices used, then, for making domestic movement more efficient. But passages had another effect, as Evans explains: they were "the architectural solution to the servant problem (the problem of their presence being part of their service, that is)." As in the section drawings of streets from dos Santos to Henard, passages divided "the house into two domains—an inner sanctuary of inhabited, sometimes disconnected rooms, and an unoccupied circulation space." In domestic spaces, as urban section drawings depict the circulation of services disappearing underground, service circulates invisibly. And although the drawings do show drainpipes and hallways, we can imagine the analogous occurrence, once the fluids and people in transit are present, of what the cartographer J. B. Harley called (with respect to maps) *cartographic silence*.[6]

Spaces

Three examples, chosen practically at random. The first issue of the magazine *Arquitectos de México* (Fig. 2), directed by Manuel González Rul and Jorge Gleason Part and published in July 1956, presented (among others) a house designed by Carlos Reygadas and located on Palmas Street in a luxury neighborhood of Mexico City. On the ground floor, along with the vestibule, front room, living room, dining room, scullery, kitchen, and other rooms, there are three small spaces that share a bathroom and are labeled with three upper-case letters: C.CR (Fig. 3). The second issue of the same magazine, published four months later, features an apartment building designed by the brothers David and Rubén Cymet; the building still exists today, at the intersection of Viaducto and Coyoacán Avenue, at the edge of the upper-middle-class Del Valle neighborhood. On each of its ten floors are two apartments, a private elevator, a living room, dining room, kitchen, three bedrooms, and—with direct access from the utilities patio—a small space measuring no more than a fourth of the bedroom area and labeled with the letters C.C. (Fig. 4) The meaning of these letters is finally revealed to us in a couple of blueprints published in the second issue of the magazine *Arquitectura y Decoración* (Fig. 5) in September 1937. The blueprints correspond to two houses designed by Luis Barragán, numbers 141 and 143 on Mexico Avenue in the Hipódromo Condesa neighborhood (Fig. 6). The front of each house measures 4.15 meters and has four floors, including the ground floor. On the access level is the garage, the ironing room, a closet, and, before reaching the back yard, a room with a bathroom labeled *cuarto de criados* [servants' room]: the inscription C.CR. in the blueprint by Reygadas and C.C. in the Cymet brothers' plan. To reach the backyard, then, you have to walk through this room, which has a little bathroom containing a toilet and shower but no sink, at least in the blueprints.

Esther McCoy was born in 1904 in Arkansas, but she grew up in Kansas. She studied at the University of Michigan and began her career as a writer in New York. In 1932, she moved to Los Angeles. At the start of World War II, McCoy studied technical drawing, and in 1944 she found work as a draughtswoman in the offices of R. M. Schindler, a Viennese-born architect who had worked with Frank Lloyd Wright before moving to California. In 1945, McCoy published her first text on architecture: "Schindler: Space Architect." In the early 1950s, she took several trips to Mexico, visiting projects and getting to know eminent Mexican architects of the day. In August 1951, the magazine *Arts & Architecture* published an issue on Mexico that included work by Barragán, O'Gorman, Max Cetto, Enrique del Moral, and Ramón Torres, among others. It also included an article by McCoy: "Architecture in Mexico." In it, she discusses the relationship between modernity and tradition in Mexican architecture. "The popular home in Mexico is the only authentically native style," she states. *Modern* architects had studied the popular home to understand its configuration; moreover, they had studied how to solve the problem of low-cost housing. McCoy writes about the "Hollywood Modern"-style houses in Polanco, which differed from the supposedly colonial influence of the neighboring homes only in their lack of decoration. She also describes the houses in the Pedregal area, with their nine-car garages. Later on in the text, she adds: "One serious defect to a North American used to a servantless house is the cramped and characterless Mexican kitchen. It was not, however, until the United States ran through its servant class that our kitchen became a pleasant room. In Mexico today, the entry hall, boosting a rubber plant, is often larger than the kitchen. *The criado, or servant house, may one day, let us hope, borrow a little space from the master's large house.*"

In 2012, Arturo Ortiz Struck published a text in the magazine *Nexos* titled "Desde la arquitectura, la discriminación." There, he writes, "the utilities rooms in middle-class and wealthy Mexican homes and residences illustrate the dynamics of labor, gender, class, and race that we as a society have established between domestic workers and the families who employ them." One year prior, the Peruvian artist Daniela Ortiz presented her series *Habitaciones de servicio*. The 16 pieces involve an exterior photo of a house (built between 1930 and 2011), the ground floor and first floor, a brief bio of the architect who designed it, and a diagram comparing the parts of the house that corresponded to the owners and those assigned to the servants. In the Capurro house, for example, built in 1940 by Fernando Mesarina, the workers' quarters measure 4.5 square meters. In the Fariña house (1942), designed by Fernando Belaunde Terry (twice president of Peru, in addition to his career as an architect), they are larger—5.5 square meters, although the servants' area is still a quarter the size of the master bedroom. In the

6. Spanish translation consulted by the author: Harley, J. B. "Silencios y secretos. La agenda oculta de la cartografía en los albores de la Europa moderna," in *La nueva naturaleza de los mapas. Ensayos sobre historia de la cartografía*, FCE, Mexico, 2005. Harley's original text is "Silences and Secrecy: The Hidden Agenda of Cartography in Early Modern Europe," Imago Mundi.

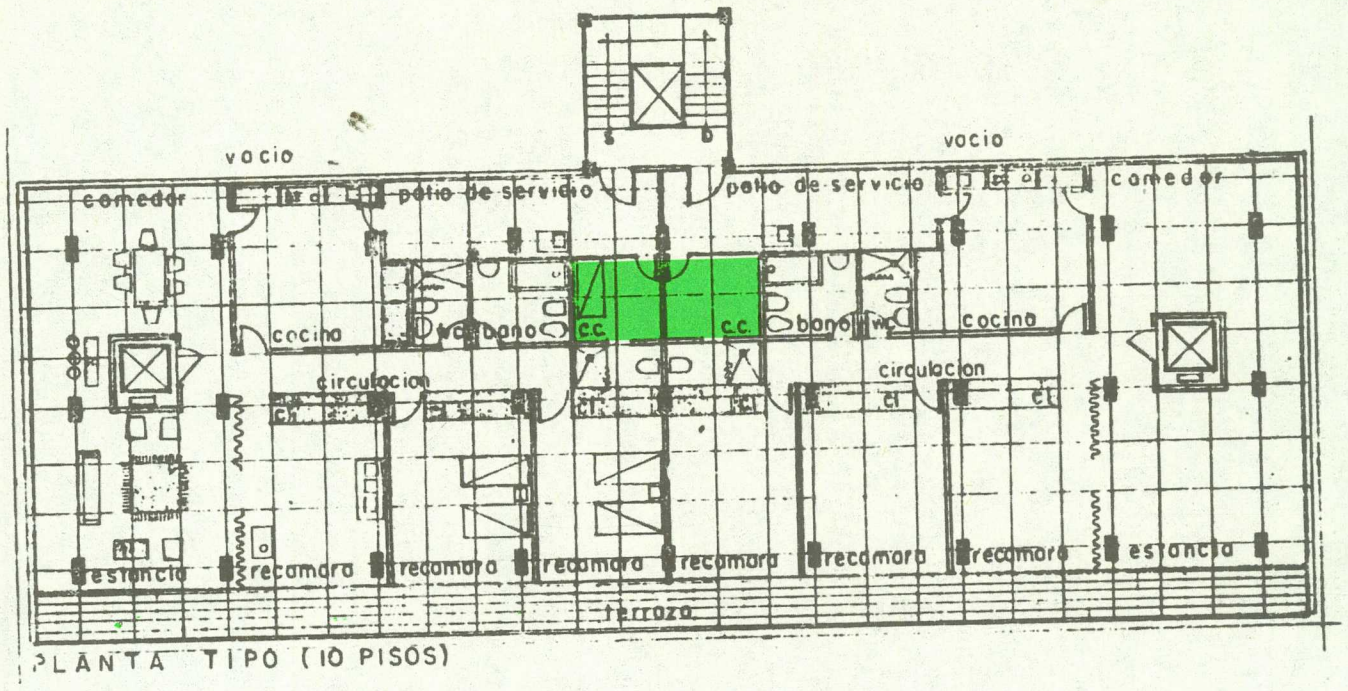


Fig. 4

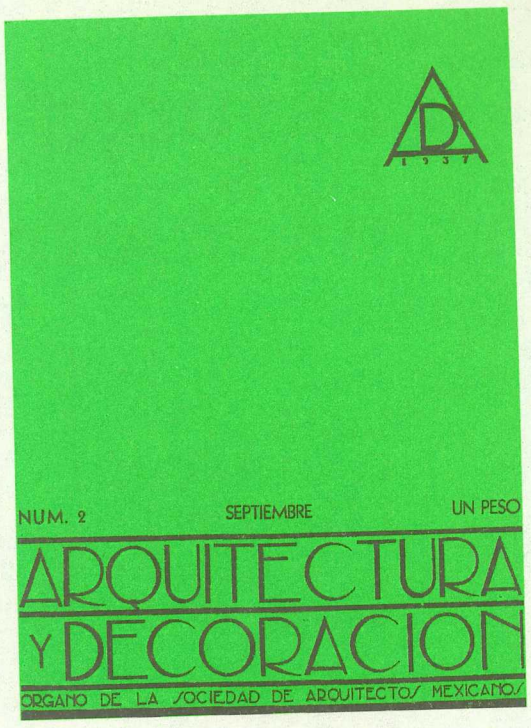


Fig. 5

Chávez house (1958), designed by Miguel Rodrigo, the maids' room measures 7.5 square meters and is found in the basement. In the VLL house (2007), by Llosa y Cortegana, the workers' area measures barely six square meters. Ortiz Struck also remarks that many architects and their clients see the spaces reserved for *the help*, despite their minimal size and almost total lack of privacy, as a *plus*—a perk tacked on to the low salaries earned by domestic workers, who very rarely receive the labor benefits established by law.

Virginia Woolf wrote about the need for and importance of having "a room of one's own" in her 1929 text of the same title. That said, there is something obviously problematic about discussing such a room in reference to maids' quarters. For domestic workers, the "room of one's own" is never truly theirs; it is always part of someone else's house. Any privacy or intimacy they find there is seen as a "concession" granted by the home's real owners. In the end, such a room is ultimately a radical form of expropriation, placing domestic workers at the beck and call of their bosses more or less round the clock. If, as Silvia Federici has argued, domestic labor entails a reorganization of territory as a social space structured around production, then perhaps the maid's room is the basic cellular unit of that organization.

Tangles

Here, Frida Escobedo analyzes and teases apart certain tangles of service-based circuits and spaces in domestic orbits. In the Torre Cervantes building, designed by Fernando Romero, various tiny rooms—each barely large enough to fit a narrow bed—are hidden behind the kitchen, without the natural light or ventilation demanded by construction regulations. The apartments themselves are thirty times bigger than those little spaces. The obvious message, of course, is that the maid's quarters don't deserve to peer onto the crystalline façade, don't deserve to share the same costly views the owners enjoy. In the house built by Luis Barragán in Tacubaya, the celebrated, much-photographed spaces envelop a service structure that extends from the ground-floor kitchen to the rooms on the roof, on the other side of the famous terrace. In the semi-attached set of buildings designed by Mario Pani on the Paseo de la Reforma, the domestic workers' rooms are located in a separate building within the same complex. In this way, the inhabitants gain some privacy, but no additional space, and they remain under the auspices of the owners. Not far from there, in Polanco, a couple of buildings offer an unusual case study. There, the main apartments are concentrated in one of the buildings; in another, a few meters away but on another plot, are the rooms for domestic workers. How much privacy and independence does this separation really secure? Finally, we turn to a residential development, Bosque Real; even the name ["Royal Forest"] presents us with an unattainable fiction. Inside, the servants' quarters are found in houses or apartments or on the rooftop terraces of those same structures. But this residential development is known, above all, for the strict measures used to control the access of domestic workers. Indeed, people are segregated before they even come inside: residents, visitors, and employees. In this way, the relationships established by these domestic orbits are magnified onto an urban scale.

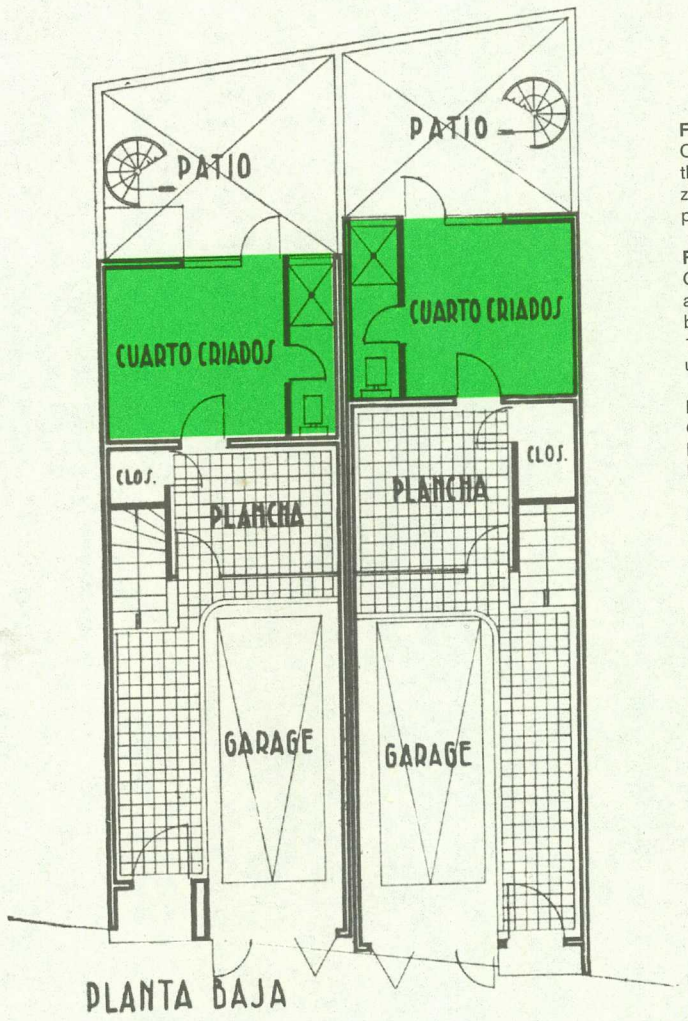


Fig. 2
Cover of the first issue of the magazine *Arquitectos de México*, published in July 1956.

Fig. 3
Gorund floor of Casa at Palmas, designed by Carlos Reygadas in 1956, labeled with three upper-case letters: C.CR

Fig. 4
Gorund floor of apartment building designed by the brothers David and Rubén Cymet; a small space measuring no more than a fourth of the bedroom area and labeled with the letters C.C.

Fig. 5
Cover of the magazine *Arquitectura y Decoración*, 2, 1937.

Fig. 6
Ground floor of Luis Barragan's houses 141 and 143, Hipódromo, Condesa. *Arquitectura y Decoración*, 2, 1937.

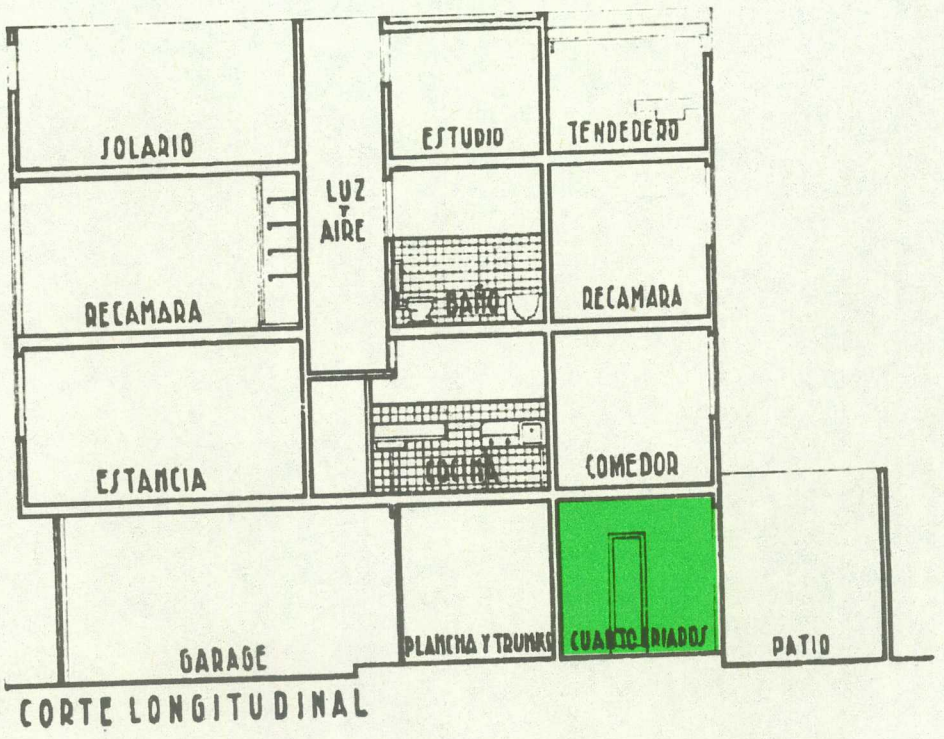


Fig. 6

1. CASA-ESTUDIO LUIS BARRAGÁN

Architect
LUIS BARRAGÁN MORFÍN

Year
1948

Location
MEXICO CITY

General Francisco Ramírez 12-14, Ampliación Daniel Garza, CDMX

Footprint
510m²

The Casa-Estudio [House-Studio] was built in 1948 by the architect Luis Barragán. The building is divided into four parts: the house, the workshop, the garden, and the service block. While it looks like a single volume from the outside, internal divisions and circulatory systems clearly separate these four components. With a practically blind façade, most of the house is used around the garden, patios, and terraces. It is essential to understand that most circulation transpires via sluices rather than a system of linear passageways.





1.1.1

Ground Floor
Annotated

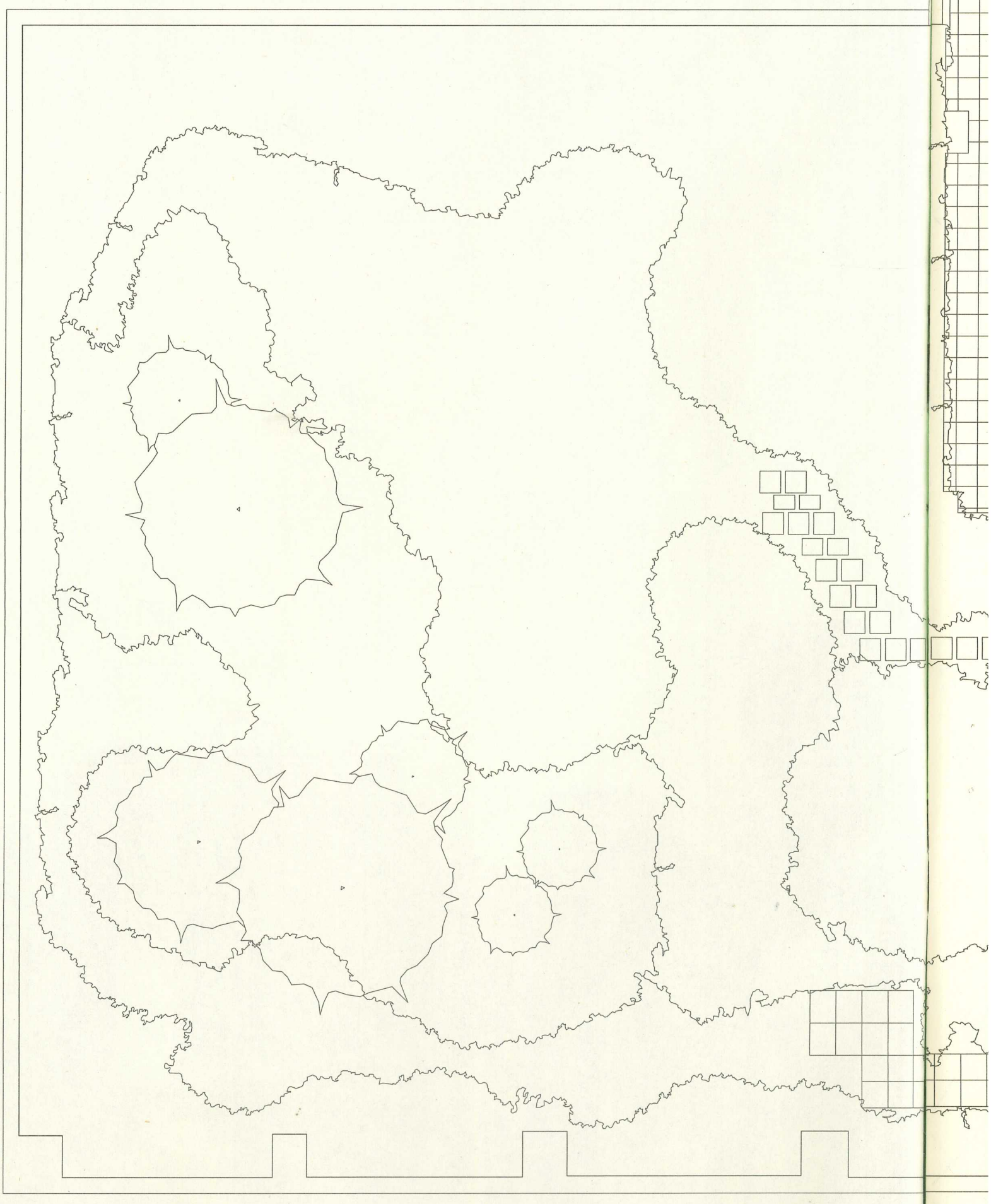
Casa-Estudio
Luis Barragán

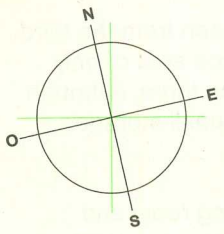
The house is accessed through a small vestibule, coated in Montezuma cypress wood, floored in basalt (*recinto* stone), and displaying a small window paned in yellow glass. This space serves as the first sluice, designed to receive people without them having to enter the main vestibule. Ascending six stairs, we find the access door, which opens out into two eaves: the first for standard use, and the second to introduce large objects into the house. This vestibule can also be accessed from the garage.

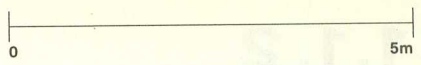
Once inside the house, we find a second vestibule, much more illuminated than the first, with zenithal light from the double-height staircase that leads to the bedrooms. The staircase is lit by a single-pane side window. To the right, a door leads to the living room and the library. Straight ahead, another door leads to the dining room and a third to the breakfast area.

The house's design plays with different scales and levels of spatial compression. While the second vestibule presents a broader, more luminous atmosphere than the first, it isn't until we enter the living room and library that we encounter a complete double height and a large picture window overlooking the garden. The roof, which consists of wooden beams and planks, evokes old *hacienda* buildings; so does the use of various materials in the walls, creating the illusion that the house is built with half-meter walls. From this space, we can access the garden and the living room through a small, discreet sluice, as well as the workshop, accessed through a door between the living room and library. Taking the wooden stairs in the library, we can access the loft, which contains a studio that connects to one of the guest rooms.

From the main vestibule, we can access the dining room, which contains a wooden table with a single head. Beneath the table are two buzzers, used to ring the domestic help if necessary—discreetly and silently, unbeknownst to the diners. From this space, a small lock leads to the living room or the garden. The opposite end also connects to the breakfast area, which contains a small table and two chairs. Finally, through another sluice, the breakfast area connects to the kitchen, which in turn connects to the service staircase via a final sluice.




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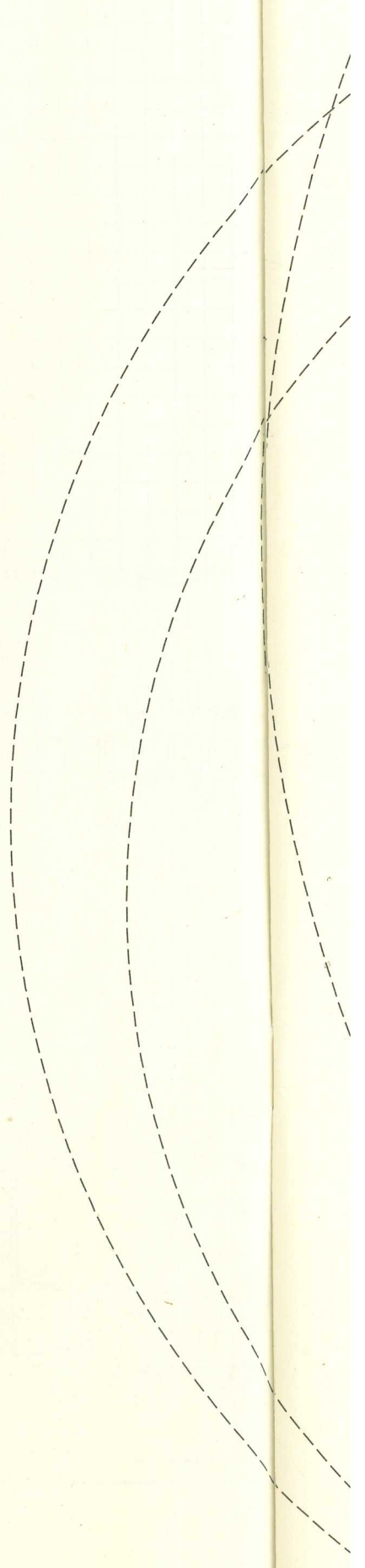
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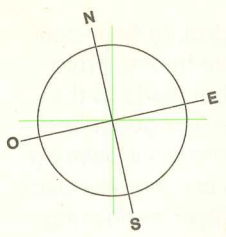
Ground Floor
Orbits

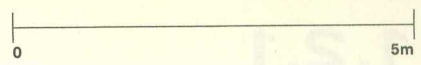
Casa-Estudio
Luis Barragán

On the ground floor, the sluices function not only as a means of circulation, but also as a means by which domestic workers may move through the house without being seen by its inhabitants or guests. The first example is the sluice that connects the garage to the kitchen and the service staircase behind the vestibule: any movement here is impossible to detect from the main vestibule. This sluice has a surface area of 5.50 m^2 and includes a series of storage closets. The second sluice connects the kitchen with the breakfast area without having to pass through the vestibule. This second sluice has a surface area of 2.35m^2. The final sluice, located between the living room, dining room, and garden, provides a way to move between two of these spaces without being seen from the third. This last sluice covers a surface area of only 1.35m^2; it is the smallest of the three, although it still has enough room for a small storage niche.

Beneath the tables in the dining room and library, respectively, are two buzzers, which can be used to ring domestic workers silently and discreetly, unbeknownst to the diners. Alongside the first sluice is a spiral staircase that ascends two continuous levels, all the way up to the service quarters on the rooftop terrace. This terrace is contained within a space measuring 1.44m wide and 1.77m long.




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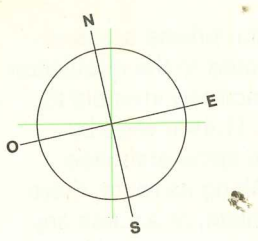
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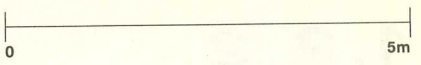
Upper floor
Annotated

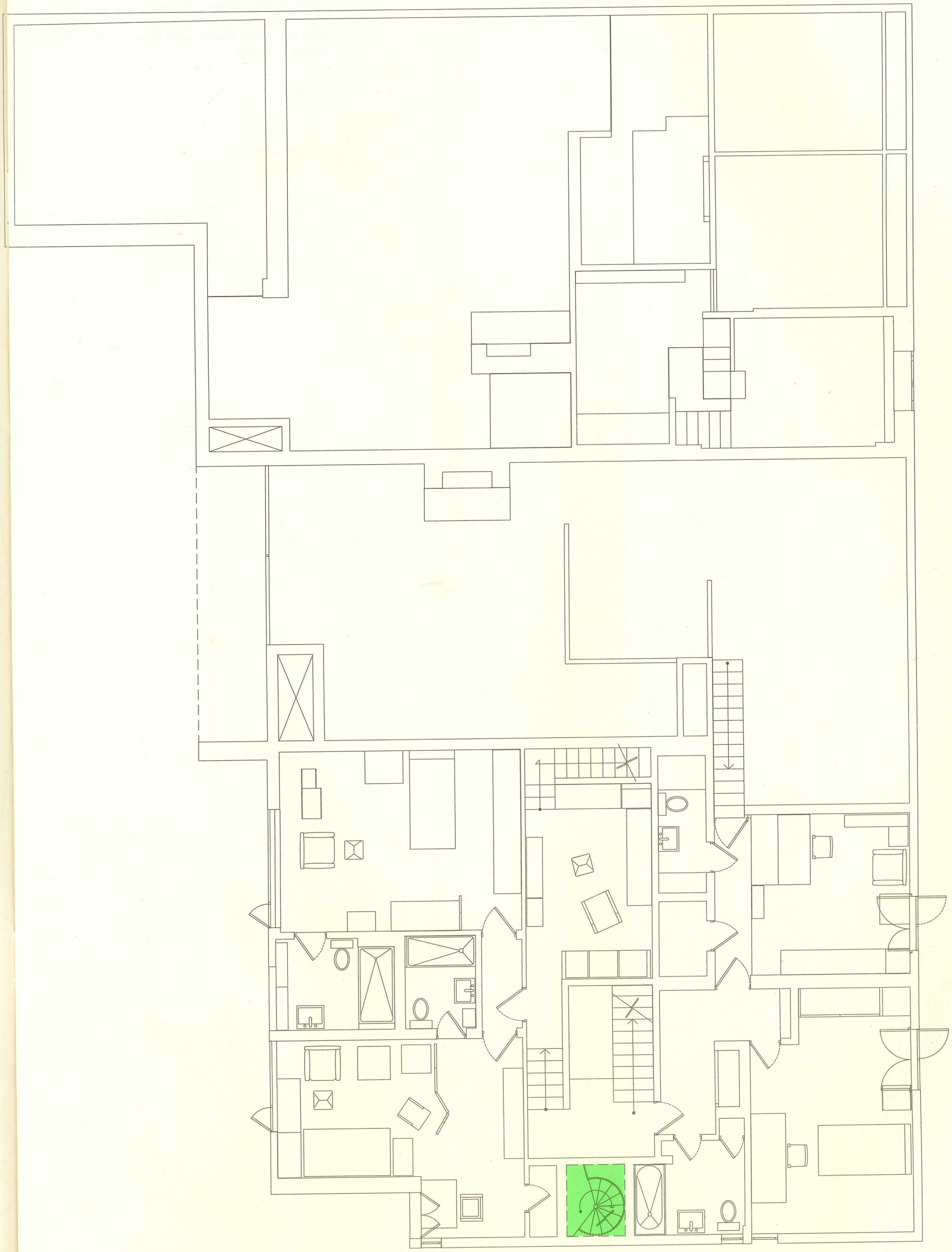
Casa-Estudio
Luis Barragán

The upper floor is organized as a series of half-levels designed to distribute and display, along one's path through the house, the studios, rooms, and leisure spaces in the private part of the building.

The second vestibule on the ground floor connects most of the spaces in the house. From the landing on the staircase that leads to the bedrooms, we can access the first guest bedroom through a door located next to a painting of Mathías Goeritz. This room is a simple space that contains one of the few bays overlooking the street. On the other side, we can access the loft, which is found in the double-height space in the ground-floor library.


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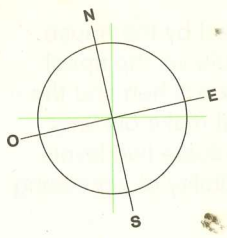
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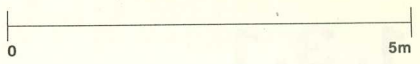
Upper floor
Orbits

Casa-Estudio
Luis Barragán

If we continue on toward the bedrooms, we reach a small vestibule that leads, on the left, to the "white room"; on the right, toward Luis Barragán's bedroom. Both rooms look out onto the garden of the house and contain a private bathroom. Together, they constitute the most private and intimate part of the house. When we leave these rooms, we reach another leisure space that then leads to the terrace via a wooden staircase.

On the upper floor and in the private areas of the house, the module devoted to the circulation of domestic workers is completely invisible to all other spaces. The block (1.44m wide by 1.77 long) that contains the spiral staircase maintains its dimensions. Along its route, there is no way to illuminate, ventilate, or access any other spaces in the house, despite its adjacency to the landing on the staircase in the main vestibule. The staircase is continuous, from the ground floor to the workers' quarters on the roof; there is no landing until it reaches its destination at the top.


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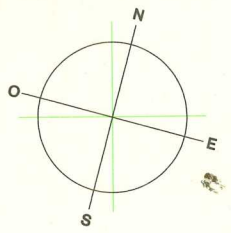
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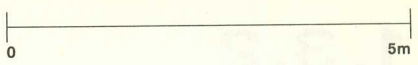
Rooftop terrace
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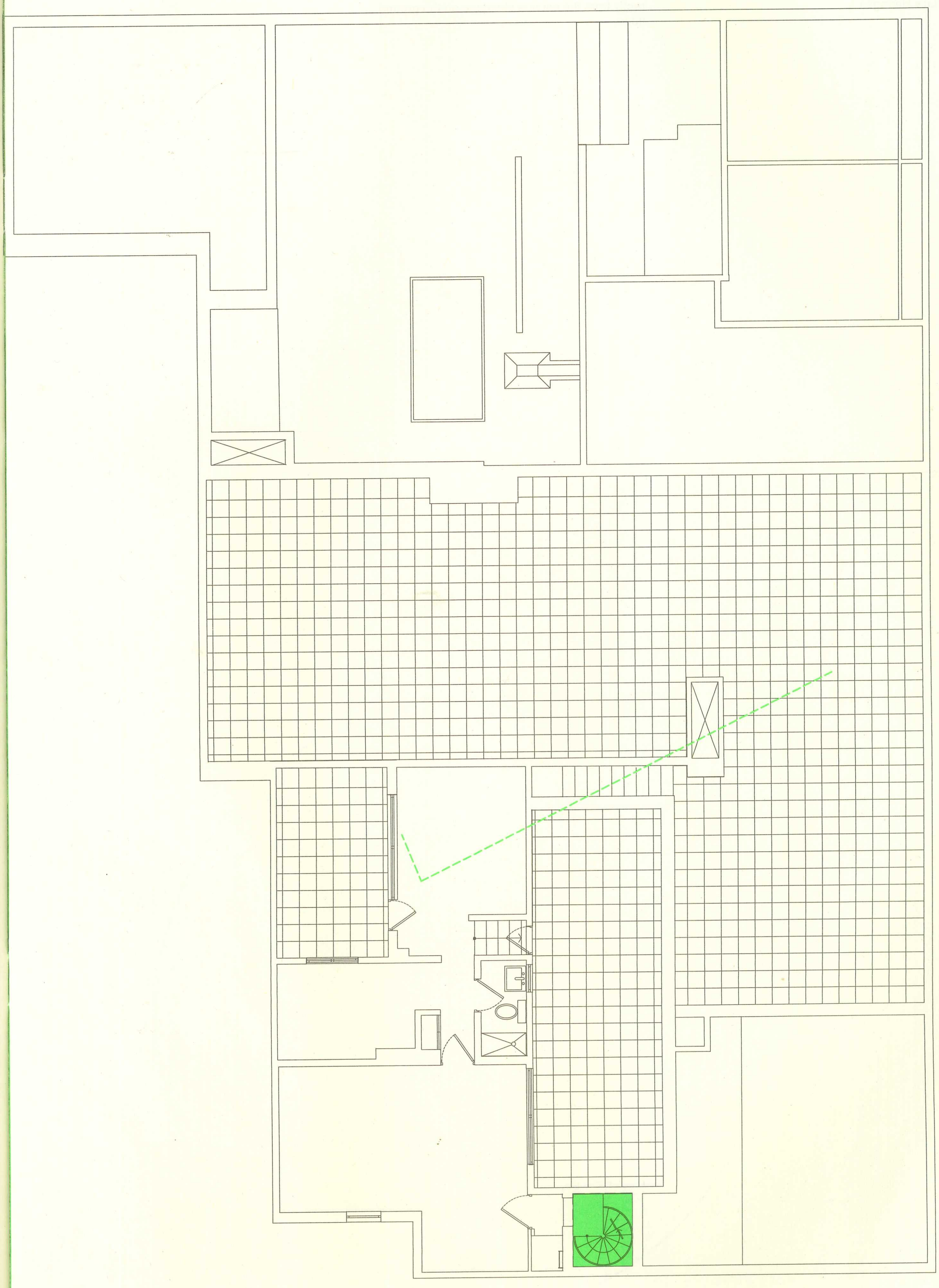
Casa-Estudio
Luis Barragán

The terrace is composed of flat walls displaying a range of colors, from pink to orange, with clay tiles across the entire floor. The height of the walls and the vegetation hanging from the garden isolate this space from the city, directing all attention skyward. A series of geometric volumes conceal the living room chimney, a ventilation duct, an elevated water tank, and the service quarters. The terrace has a total surface area of over 150 m^2.

This service module, embraced by the house in its entirety, is only accessible via the spiral service staircase between the kitchen and the garage. To ascend it, we must make our way up from the ground floor and scale two levels without a landing or the possibility of accessing the other levels of the house.


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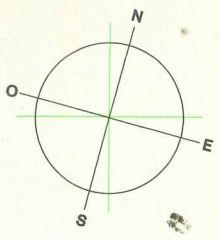


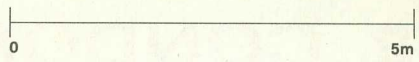
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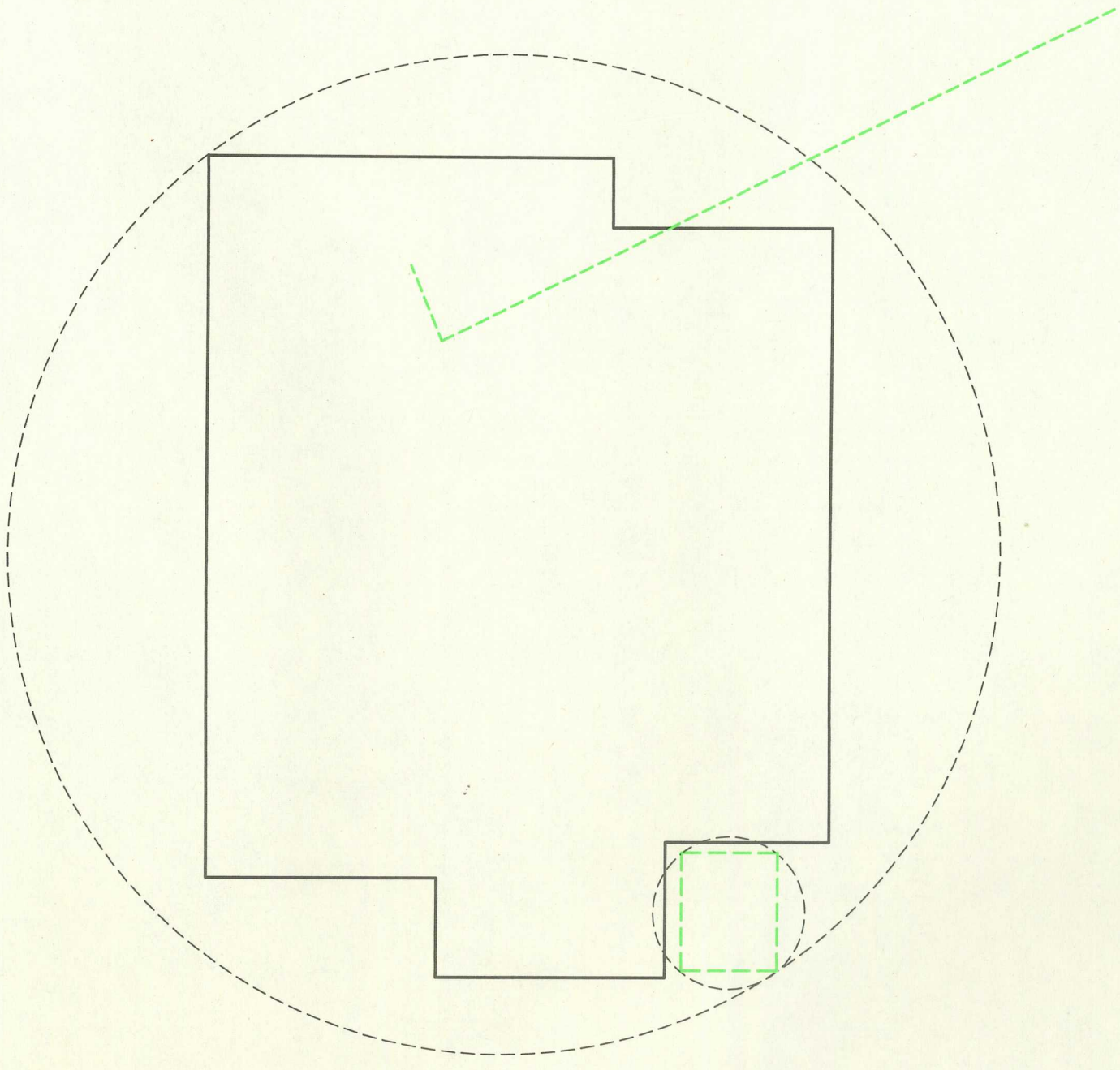
Rooftop terrace
Orbits

Casa-Estudio
Luis Barragán

The service module contains two patios of its own, likely intended more for service-oriented tasks and drying clothes than for leisure. In turn, the patios help illuminate and ventilate the three domestic workers' bedrooms, in such a way that these spaces are not shown and cannot be seen from the primary rooftop terrace, the street, or the garden. In this way, their existence is altogether imperceptible, unless accessed directly from the service staircase on the ground floor.


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2. CONDOMINIO VARSOVIA

Architect
MARIO PANI DARQUI

Year
1956

Location
MEXICO CITY

#3 Varsovia,
Col. Juárez, CDMX

Footprint
978m²

As one of the first luxury vertical condominiums in Mexico, the Condominio Varsovia, built in response to the success of its twin on Río Guadalquivir Street, is a paragon of modern Mexican architecture. Each level of the apartment tower has three apartments. The apartments are laid out in half-levels: two apartments are located on the same level as the main elevator exit and another is located half a level below.


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Garoma

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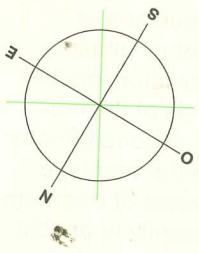
Typical floor plan
Annotated

Condominio Varsovia
Mario Pani

The largest of the first two apartments is positioned toward Reforma Avenue. It contains a living room and a kitchen, located half a level above the private part of the house, which has three bedrooms and two bathrooms. The two apartments that look out onto the Colonia Juárez neighborhood are approximately half the size of the first, and their entire layout is concentrated on the same level. Practically mirroring each other, they contain two bedrooms and a small study. The column-based structure and a central loading nucleus allow the building to display a curtain wall, with all of its façades detaching from the structure.

While the apartment block is widely known and amply divulged, it has rarely been presented as an entire condominium, comprising more than one tower. The project consists of three volumes: the apartment volume in one corner of the plot, the office volume in the back, and the service volume to one side of the apartments. The different uses of the complex are thus divided into separate volumes within the same plot, unified by a commercial ground floor. However, the circulation systems in the offices and apartments never mix with that of the domestic workers, who inhabit the tower next to the apartments.

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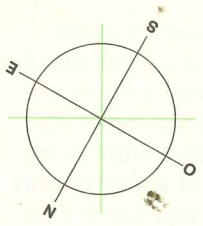
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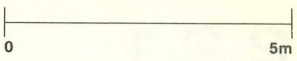
Typical floor plan
Orbits

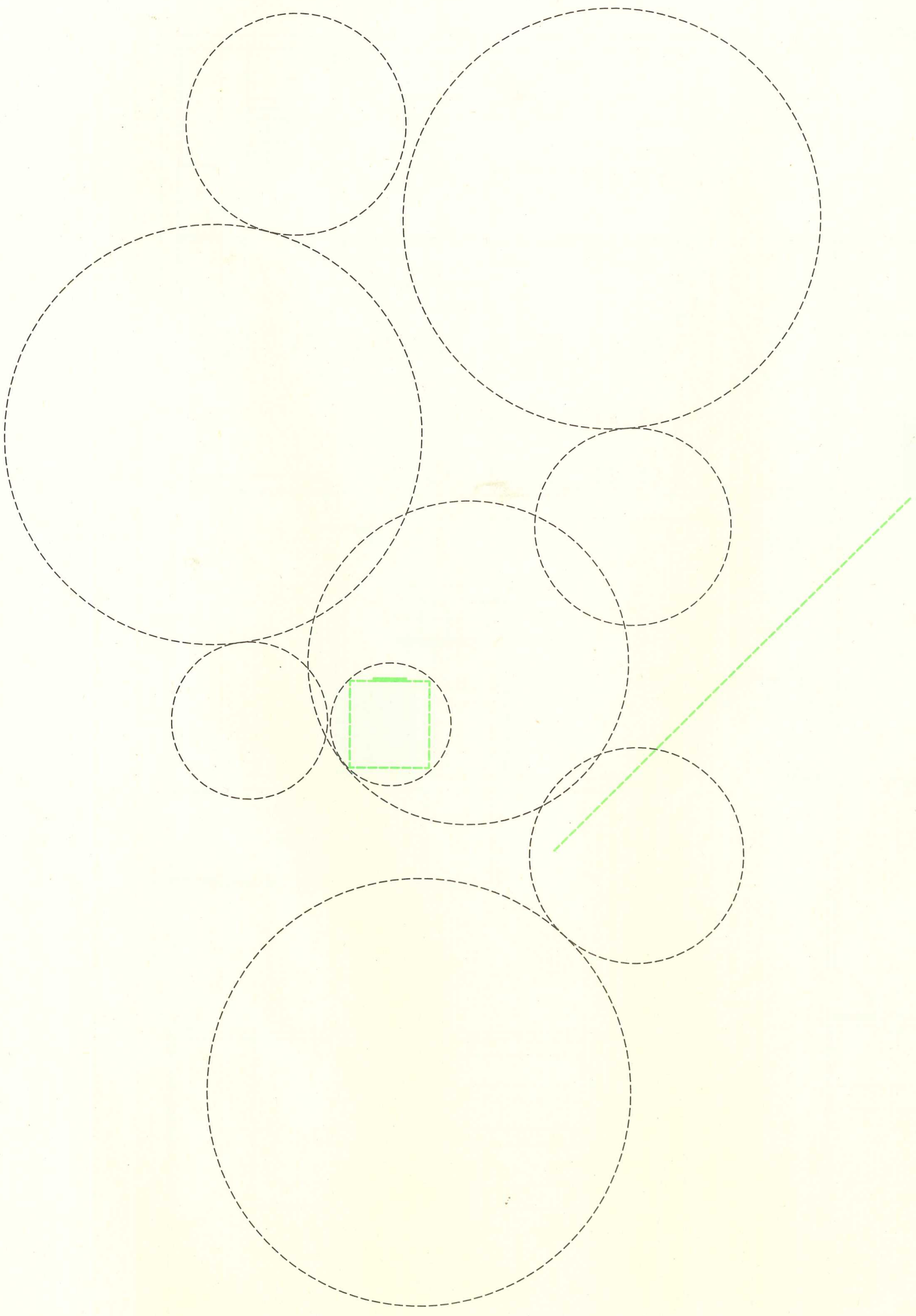
Condominio Varsovia
Mario Pani

Curiously, the service tower is designed in such a way that it never blocks the view from the apartments. That is, the façade of the first-level apartment is higher than that of the top level of service quarters. In this way, there is no visual convergence between the two volumes.

The separation between the circulation of domestic workers and apartment inhabitants begins with a second service elevator, located half a level below the arrival levels of the main elevator. Via the basement, this second elevator connects the service volume to the vestibule and the apartment volume. A series of bedroom intercoms was incorporated recently to enable direct communication with the apartments in the adjacent tower. This is the only form of communication between the apartment inhabitants and the domestic workers.


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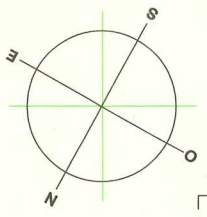
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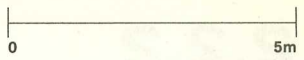
Ground floor
Annotated

Condominio Varsovia
Mario Pani

The ground floor houses the vestibule, access to the offices, vehicular access to the underground parking area, and the commercial premises; access to those businesses is primarily via Reforma Avenue and Varsovia Street. A couple others are accessed by the passageway connecting the vestibule to Reforma Avenue. While the offices are accessed via Varsovia Street, the apartment tower can be accessed from both streets. A series of double-heights and gaps allow the main commercial premises to ventilate toward them, as well as one of the kitchens toward the vertical circulation of the service volume.

On the ground floor, we can clearly see the disconnect between the service volume and the rest of the building. For one thing, we can see how the service staircase ascends to the domestic workers' quarters and descends to the basement without connecting to any other part of the project. For another, we can see the service elevator, which rises up to each apartment half a level below the main elevator.


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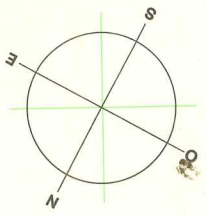

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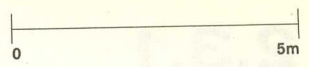
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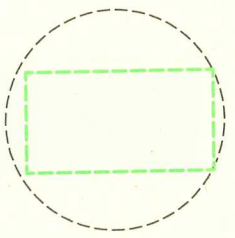
Ground floor
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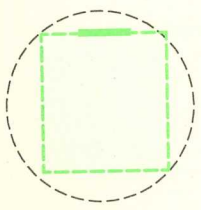
Condominio Varsovia
Mario Pani

This means that, for the domestic workers to leave the building from the ground floor of the complex, or to circulate from their quarters to the apartments, they must go all the way down to the basement and then come back up in the service elevator, passing unnoticed in front of the apartments' circulation system. The nucleus of the service staircase is barely 80cm wide on each of its ramps.


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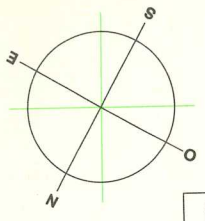


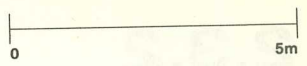
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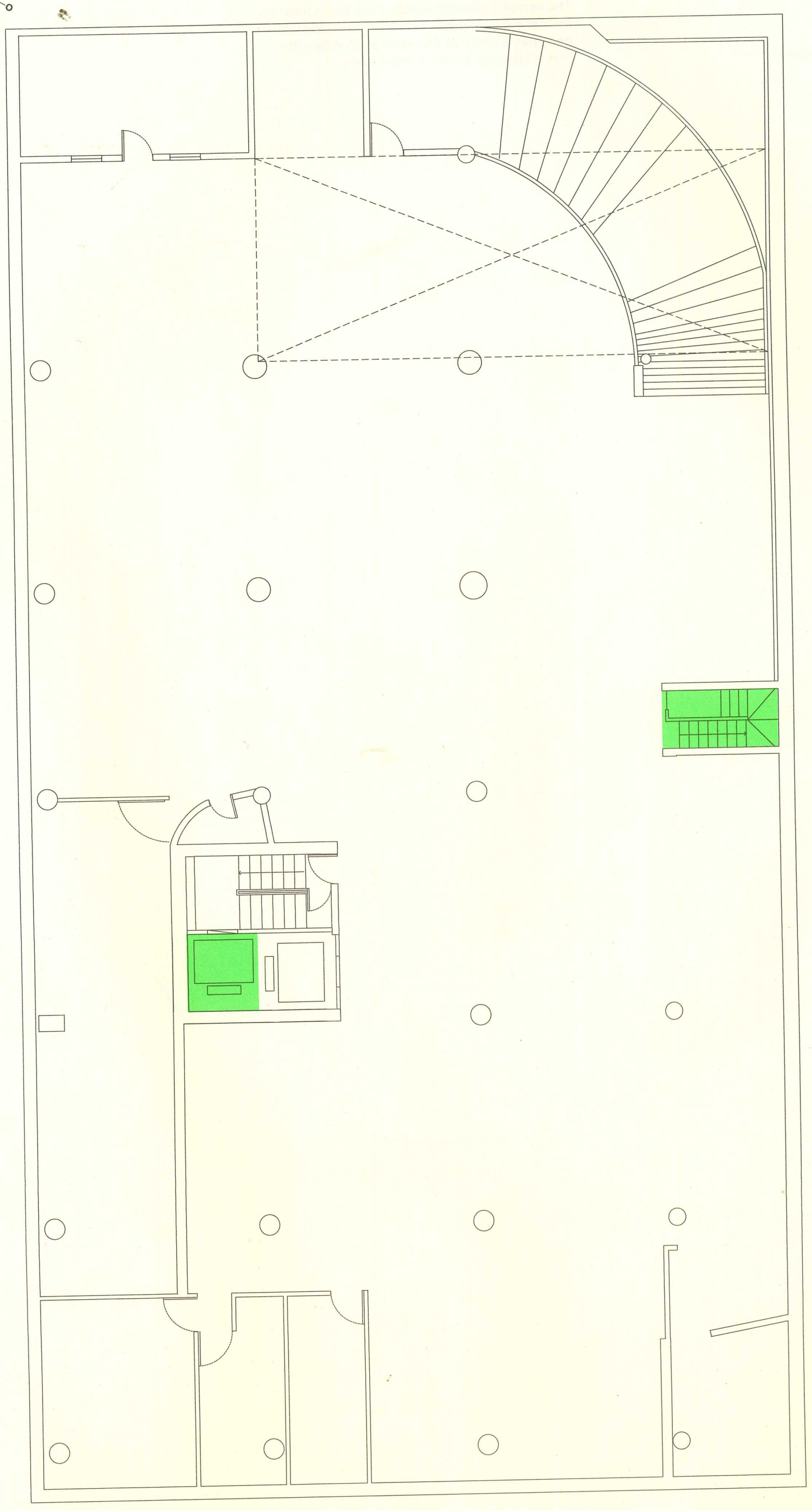
Basement
Annotated

Condominio Varsovia
Mario Pani

The condominium basement occupies the entire print of the plot. Here is where the column-based structure, arranged in an orthogonal grid with dividers ranging between 6m and 6.5m, is best expressed and read. While most of the space is devoted to resident parking and the access ramp, there are also secondary service areas for storage units and machine rooms at both ends. The vertical circulation system stands out in the middle.


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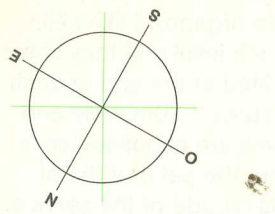


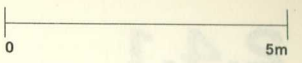
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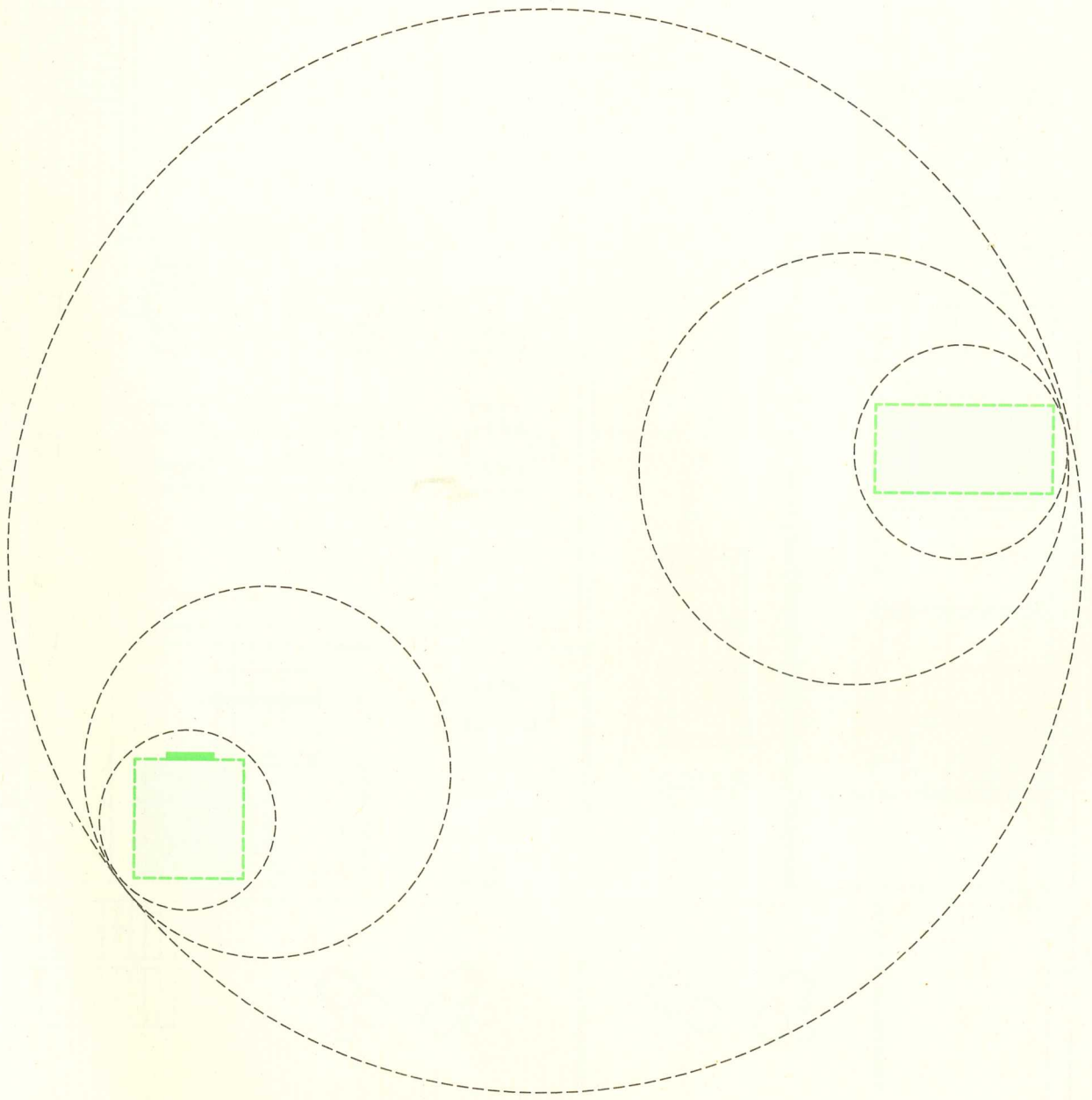
Basement
Orbits

Condominio Varsovia
Mario Pani

The basement is where the service block circulation connects to that of the apartment block. However, we must cross the parking area to go from one to the other; even then, we must go down half a level to enter the service elevator. The resident elevator reaches the same level as the car elevator does. While the service staircase has a width of 80cm on each ramp, the main staircase is over a meter wide.


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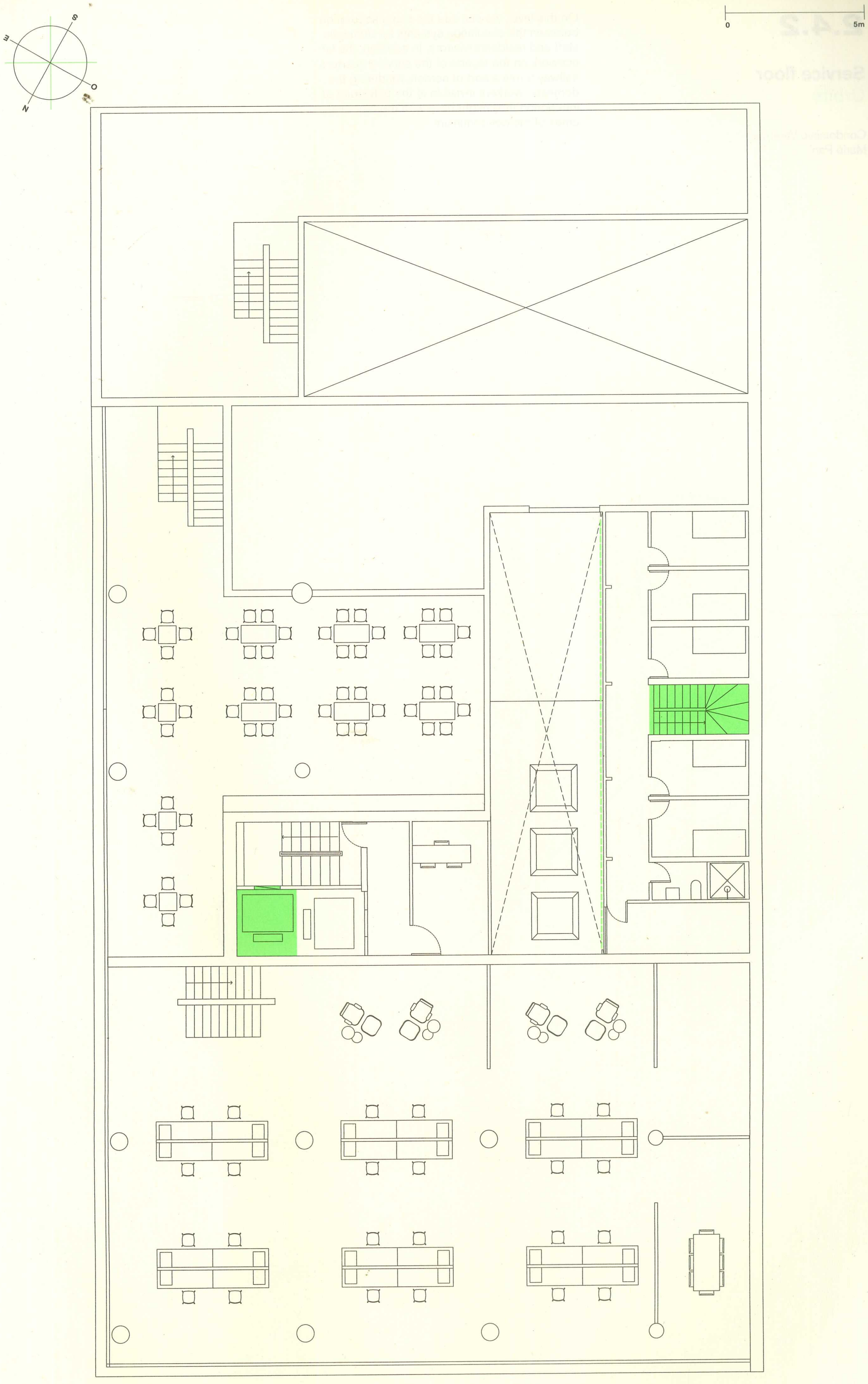
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Service floor
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Condominio Varsovia
Mario Pani

The only space adjacent to the service quarters are the first-floor offices. In addition to the office tower in the back of the building, there are two first-floor offices, below the apartment block, which look out onto Reforma Avenue and Varsovia Street. Each of these offices has an independent access from Varsovia and contains a free floor between the grid of columns that demarcate them.

The service bedrooms are organized like cells. There are four cells on each level and they share a bathroom, which is located at the end of each hall. Each bedroom measures 1.70m wide and 3.30m long. The bedrooms are accessed via a hallway that looks out onto the patio of the office volume. However, the façade of the service hallway is a lattice: while it ventilates and illuminates the circulation system and the bedrooms, the façade is practically blind from the outside. This style contrasts with both the apartment and the office façades, which are completely framed in steel and paned with clear glass.

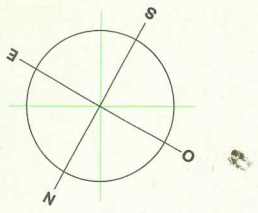

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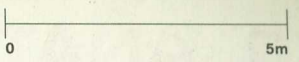
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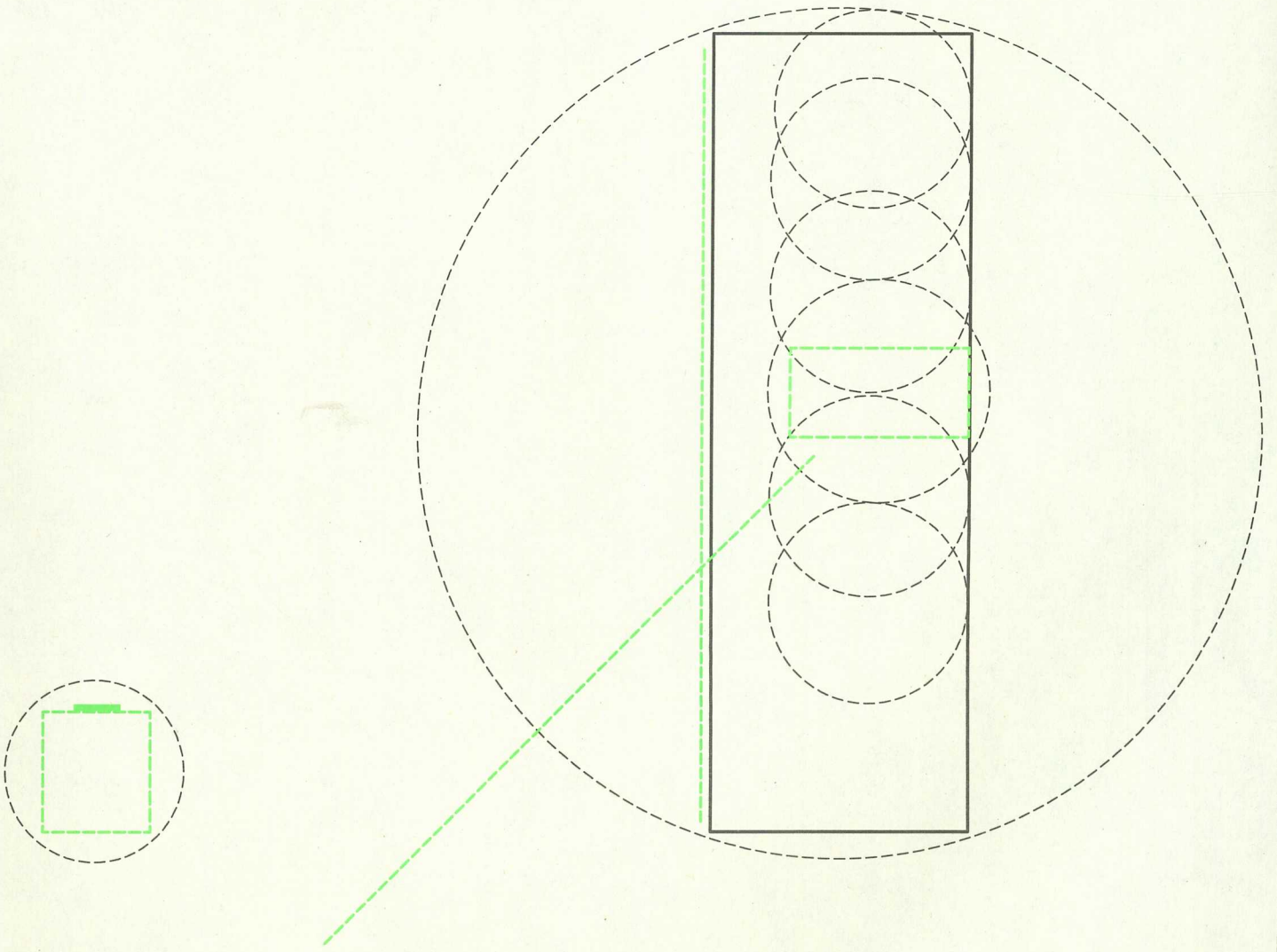
Service floor
Orbits

Condominio Varsovia
Mario Pani

On this level, we can see the same separation between the circulation systems for domestic staff and residents/visitors. In addition, the latticework on the façade of the service quarters' hallway forms a sort of screen, rendering the domestic workers invisible at the only point of interaction they might have with the other volumes of the condominium.


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5. ANATOLE FRANCE 71 and 90

Architect
ANONYMOUS

Year
UNKNOWN

Location
MEXICO CITY

Anatole France 71 and 91,
Polanco, CDMX

Footprint
806m²

This anonymously designed building is located in Polanco, one of Mexico City's most affluent neighborhoods. Polanco was founded in the first half of the twentieth century; it has been home to the Mexican upper class ever since. While the building's exact year of construction is unknown, we can date it to sometime in the second half of the twentieth century. It is located on the corner of the avenues Emilio Castelar and Anatole France, in front of Lincoln Park, which is considered the heart of the neighborhood and is among the city's most emblematic public spaces.





5.1.1

Urban plan
Annotated

Anatole France 71
and 90

The ten-level building has a commercial ground floor. The ground-floor businesses range from restaurants to clothing stores, with a discreet pedestrian access at #71 Anatole France. The building is accessed via a double-height vestibule entirely covered in different kinds of marble; there are two elevators for accessing the apartments. The façade predominantly consists of large picture windows with balconies at the ends and on the corners, which overlook the park from the living room of each apartment and thus highlight the views afforded by the height of the building. The smallest windows belong to the bedrooms and leisure areas. On the top level is a 450m^2 penthouse with a double-height living space. The penthouse has three bedrooms, while the apartments have either two or three.

Despite the dimensions of the apartments, neither they nor the penthouse include a space specifically devoted to living quarters for household workers. Instead, a second and completely independent building was built on #90 Anatole France, a few buildings down the block and across the street.

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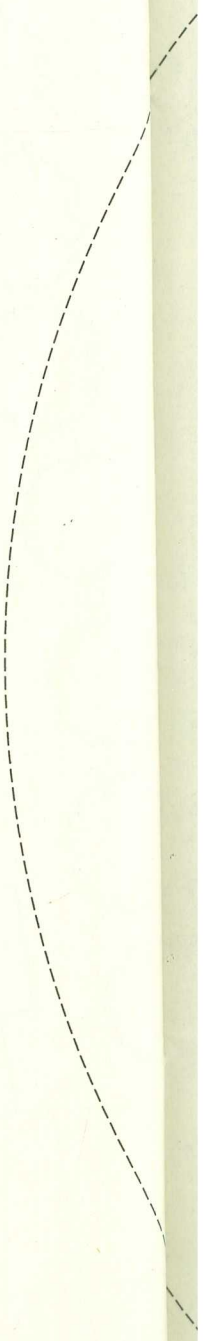
71

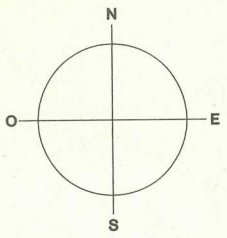
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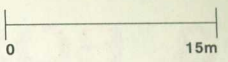
Urban plan
Orbits

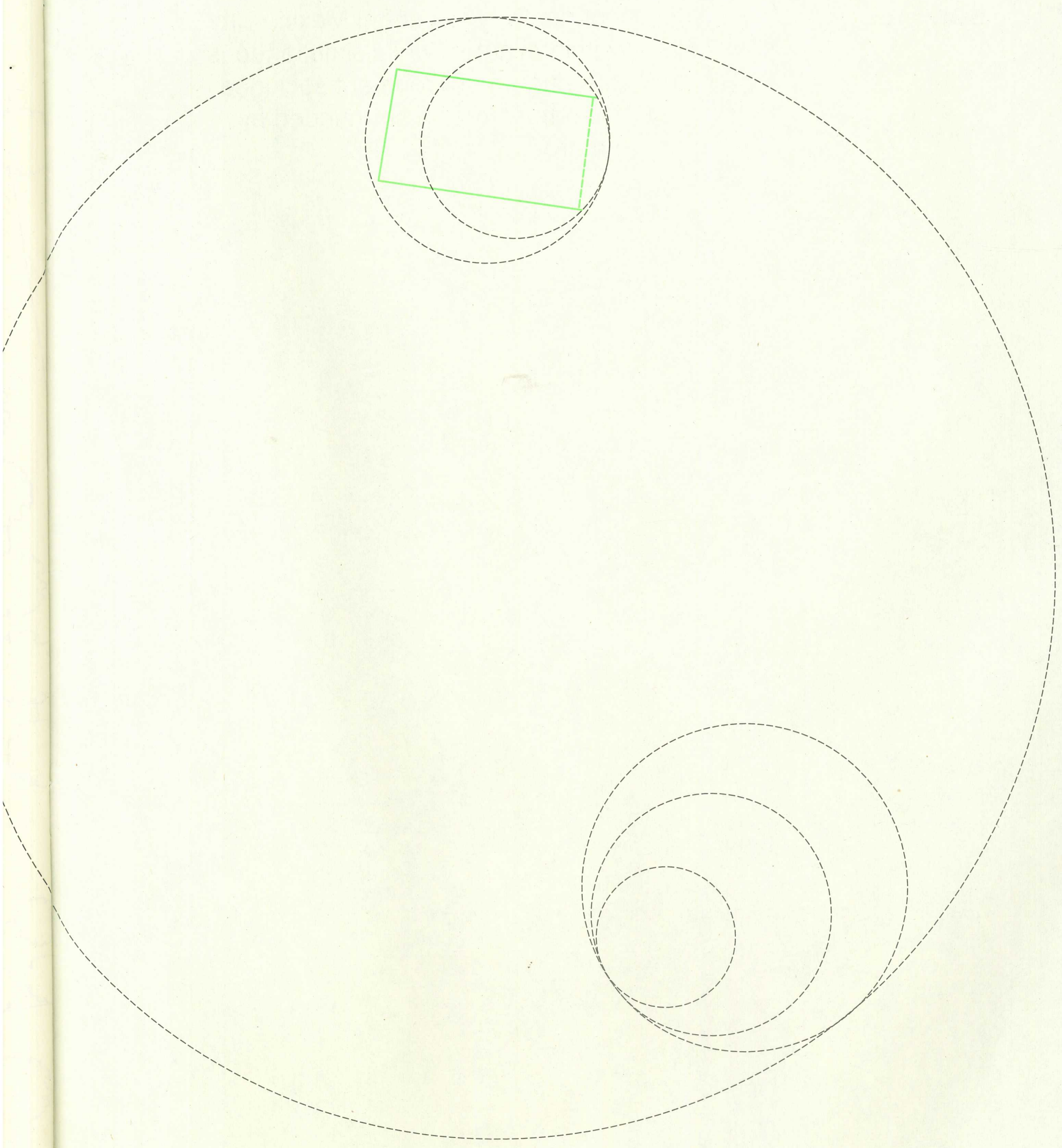
Anatole France 71
and 90

The façade of this second building is essentially the opposite of that of the apartment building. This one is practically blind, with a narrow strip of windows on each of its four balcony-free levels. The building that houses domestic staff does not have a commercial ground floor, and it is accessed via a modest metal door. The rest of the ground floor contains a parking lot for cars from the apartment building. Service accommodations in the other architectural models are marked by varying degrees of independence and isolation; here, however, they are entirely set apart. In this case, indeed, domestic workers even have a different postal address than their employers in the apartment tower facing the park.




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3. BOSQUE REAL

Year
1990s

Location
HUIXILUCAN MEXICO STATE

Footprint
560 ha

The Bosque Real [Royal Forest] urban development is located within the Metropolitan Area of the Valley of Mexico, in the municipality of Huixquilucan, Mexico State. The residential development was built in the late 1990s and has continued to develop and expand since then. It currently occupies 560 hectares of land. The promotional video defines Bosque Real as a place to live a "perfect life," ensuring supposed connectivity to central Mexico City within minutes, while simultaneously offering an environment secluded from the city and surrounded by nature.

Yo vivo en BosqueReal ¿y tú en dónde vives?

Ver Video

3.1.1

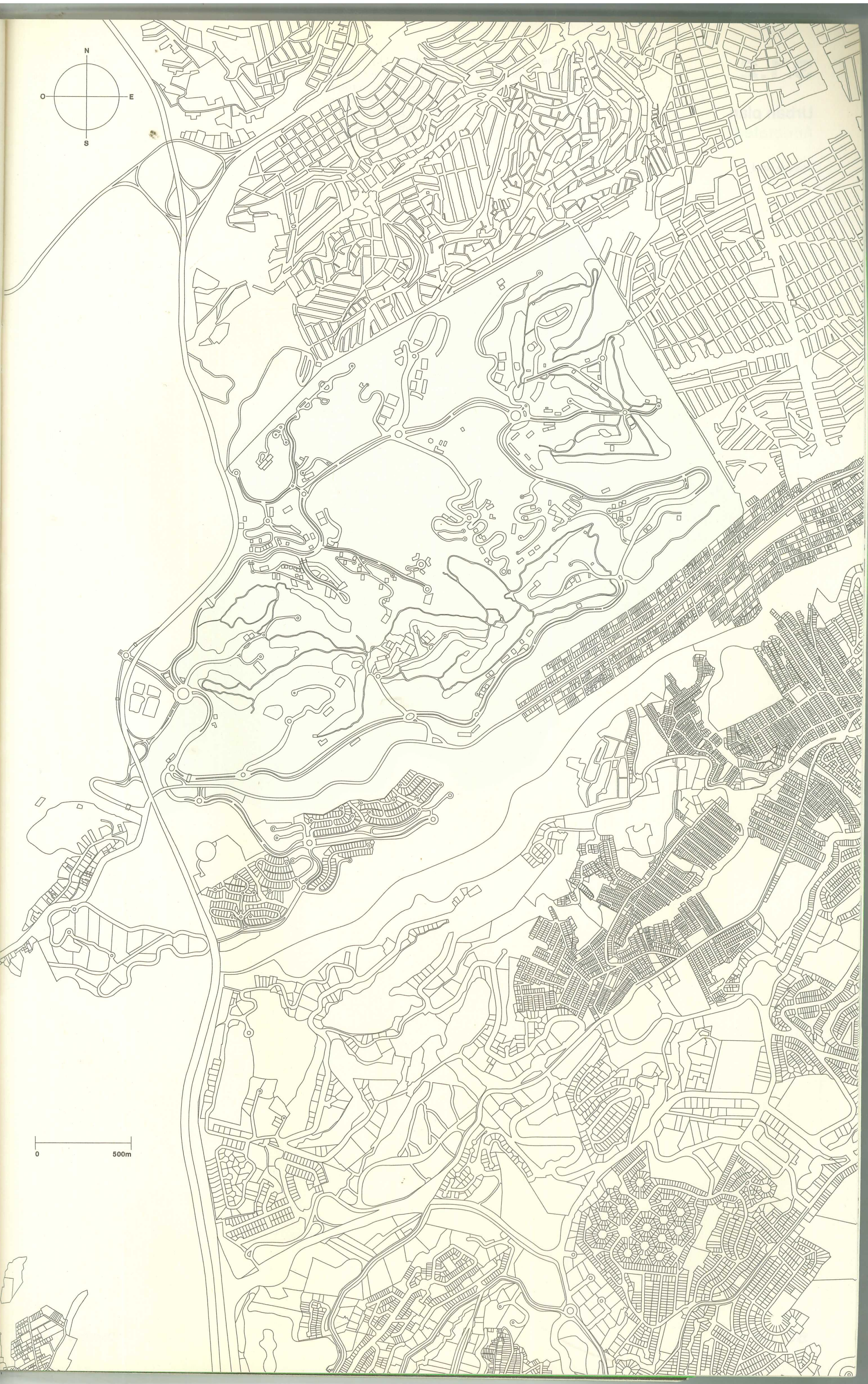
Urban plan

Bosque Real

The complex is arranged around two golf courses (eighteen-hole and nine-hole, respectively). The residential development contains its own 13km system of hydraulic concrete roadways, a closed-circuit security system, a potable water network, a self-generated electrical plant, a fiber optic network, and a 12km facilities duct. It also contains various malls, a kindergarten, an elementary school, a middle and high school under construction, and a 50,000m² Club House designed by the architect Sordo Madaleno.

The development is divided into multiple sectors characterized by different locations, costs, and plot sizes. The first, Diamante [Diamond], consists of plots in the central area of the complex, close to the Club House and overlooking the golf course; these plots start at 600m². The second, Platino [Platinum], offers plots adjacent to the golf courses and starting at 500m². The third sector, Gold, has plots located on the islands and boulevards that connect to urban development; they are not adjacent to the golf course and they measure 350m² minimum. The final section is Turquesa [Turquoise], which contains the most isolated and heavily wooded plots, starting at 300m².



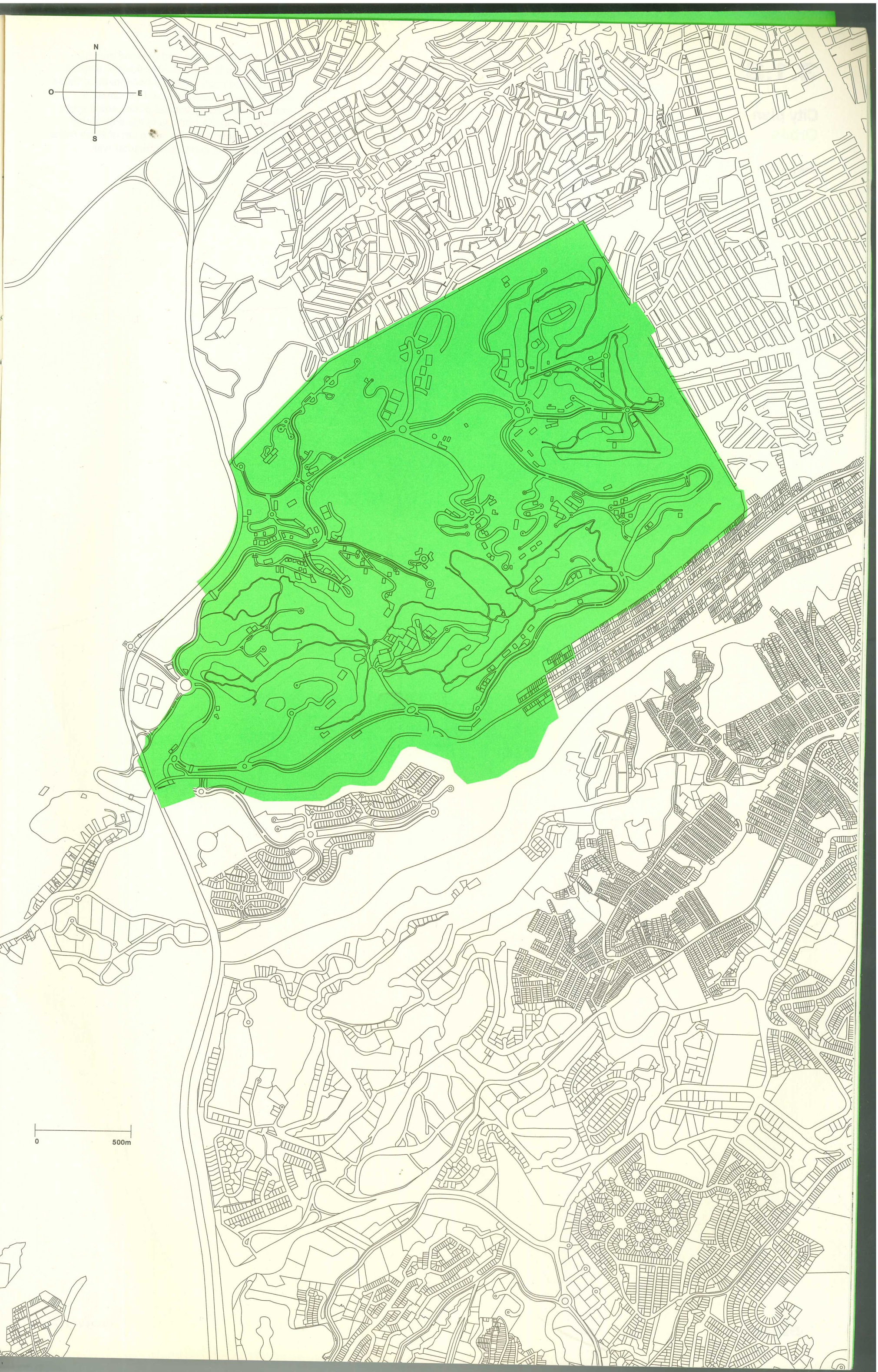

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3.1.2

Urban plan
Annotated

Bosque Real

The complex is externally delimited by its perimeter walls, which separate it from low-income residential areas. These areas typically provide the labor force that serves the more privileged neighboring sectors. In other cases, domestic workers come from communities much father away, sometimes requiring a several-hour commute.


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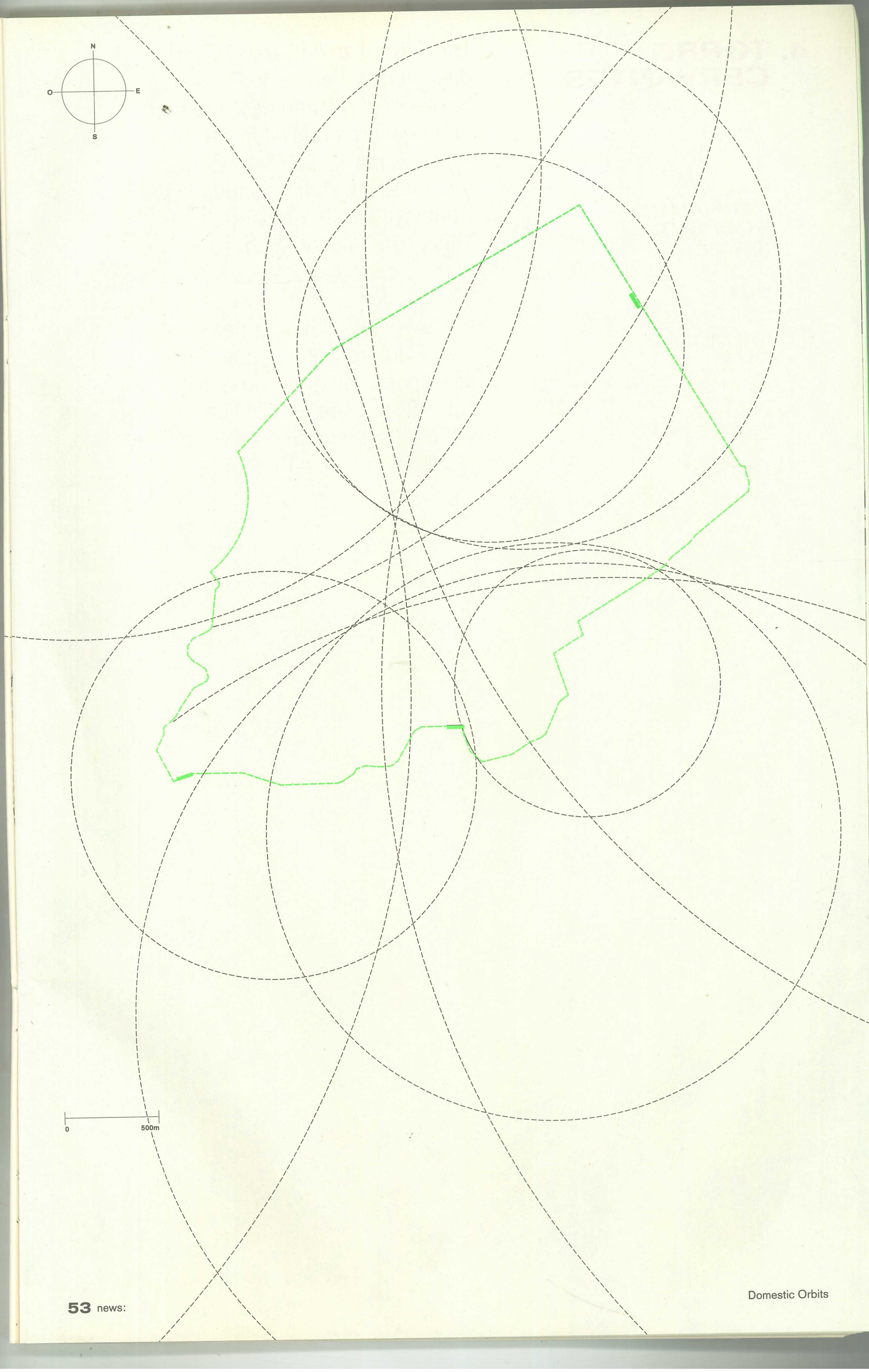
3.1.3

City plan
Orbits

Bosque Real

There are gatehouses and planned access points for the Bosque Real residents; employees can also pass through checkpoints at these sites to access the complex. In addition, a series of secondary access points admit those domestic workers who live in the adjacent areas. Such access points are a set of small metal doors along the concrete perimeter wall.

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4. TORRE CERVANTES

Architect
FERNANDO ROMERO (FR-EE)

Year
2013

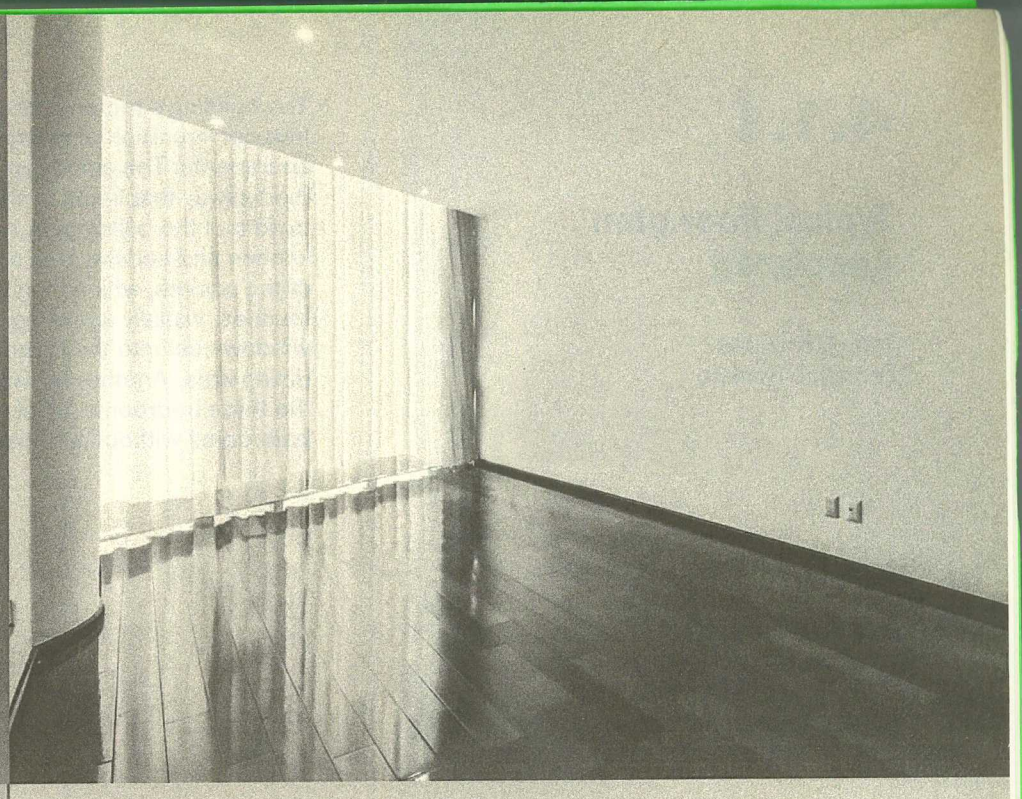
Location
MEXICO CITY

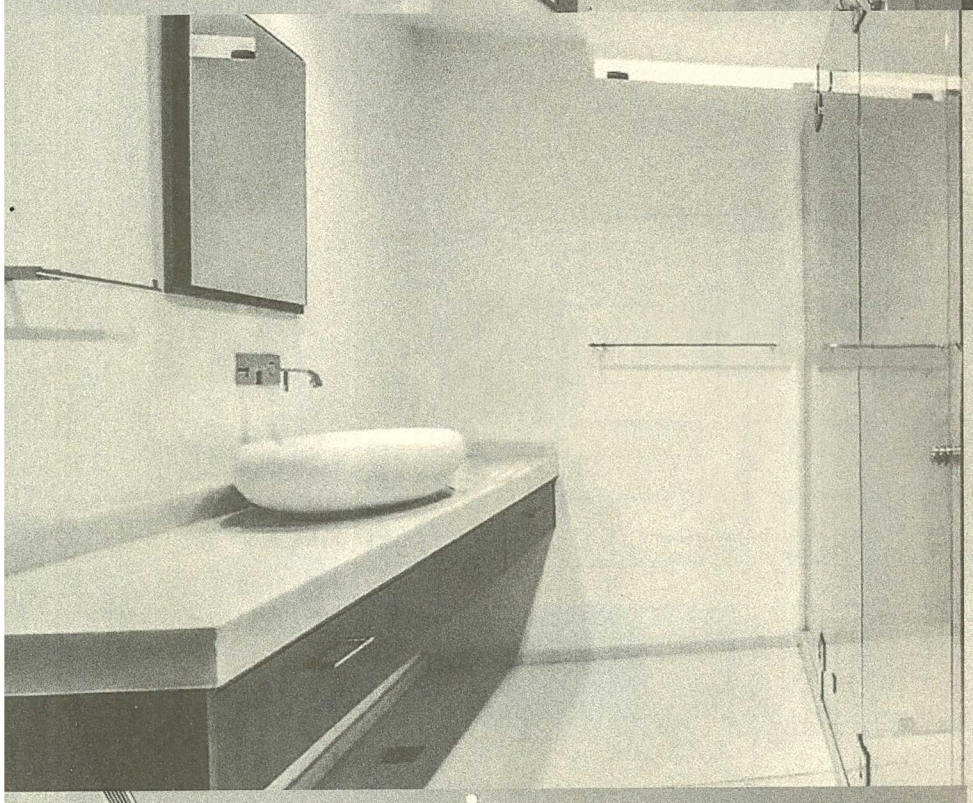
Boulevard Miguel
de Cervantes
Saavedra 3030,
Ampliación Granada, CDMX

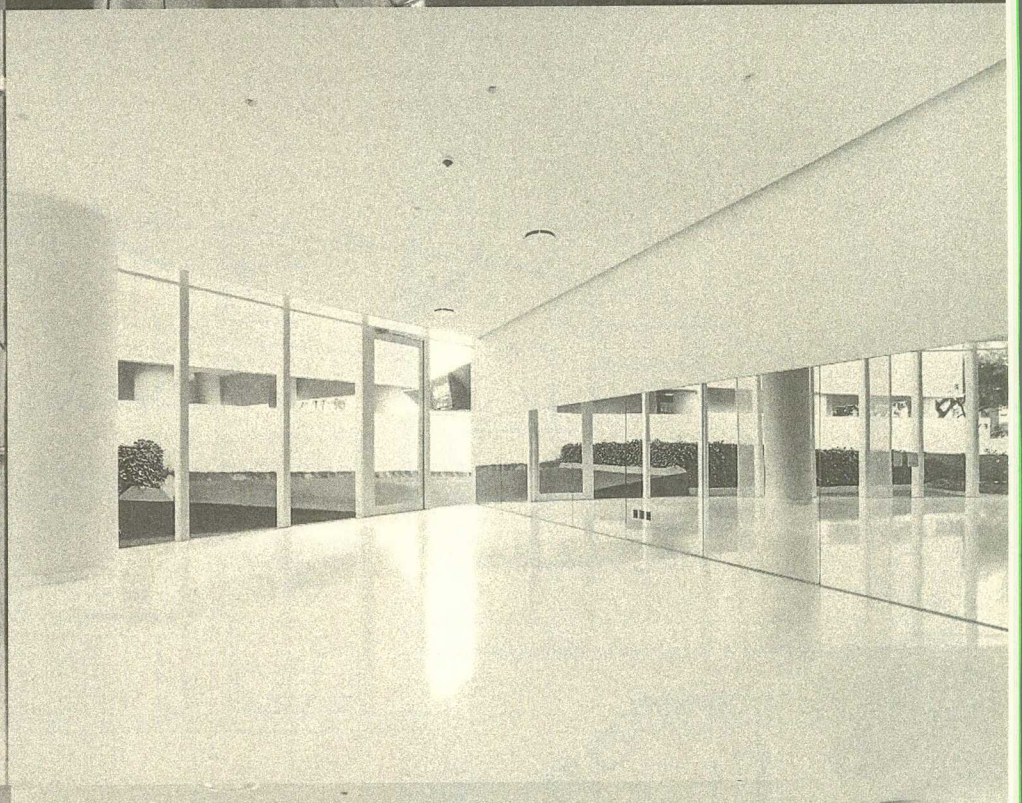
Footprint
1387m²

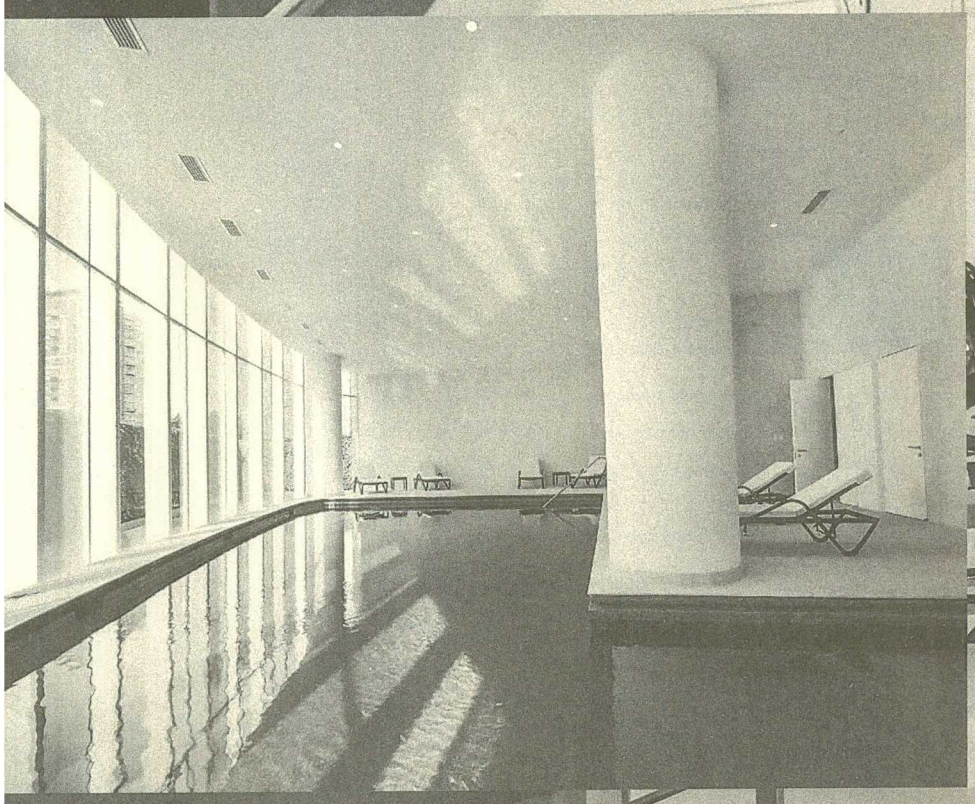
The Torre Carso [Carso Tower], designed by Fernando Romero between 2011 and 2013, is part of a new urban development that includes malls like Plaza Carso and museums such as the Museo Soumaya and the Museo Jumex. This tower is characterized by a glass façade that covers its entire elliptical form. While offices occupy the lower levels, the upper levels are exclusively residential. The apartments range between 400m² and 450m². The typical floor plan shows three apartments with three bedrooms per level.


COLGATE-PALMOLIVE

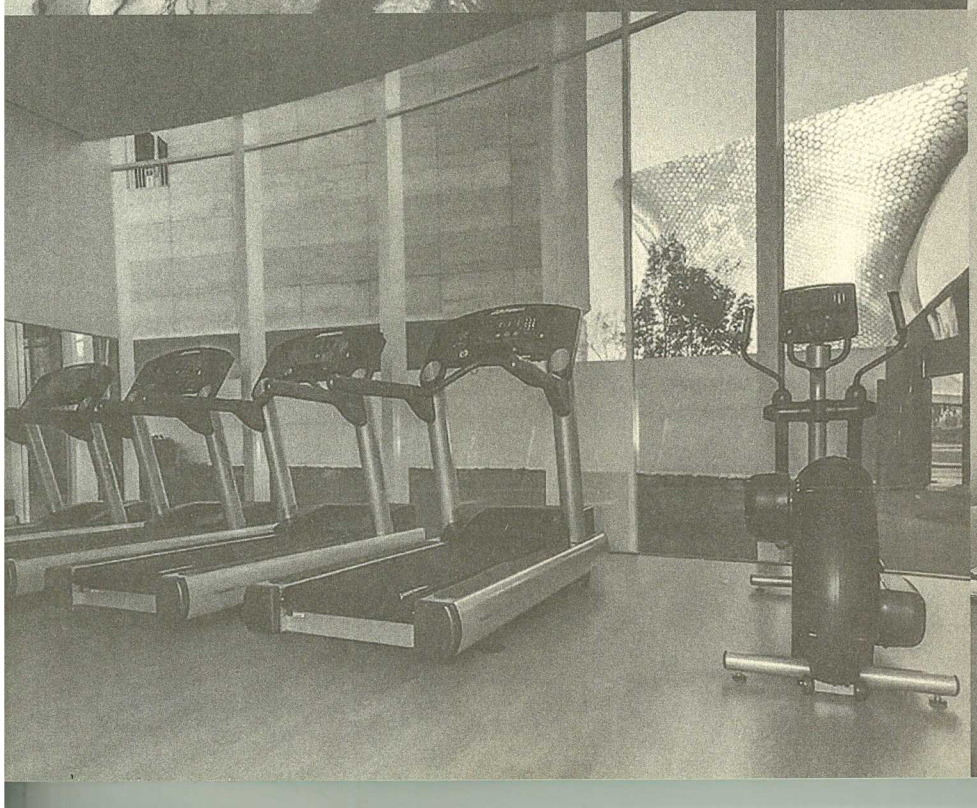


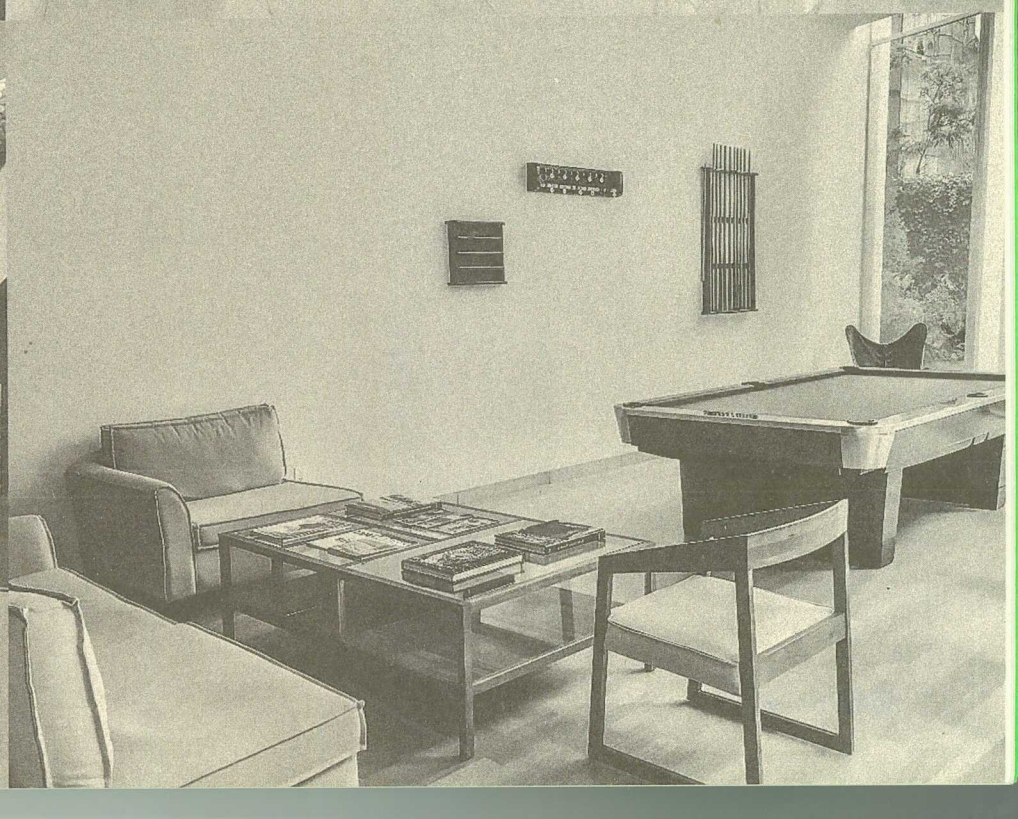










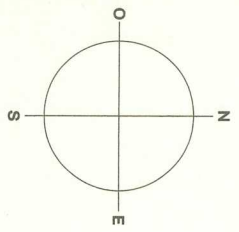


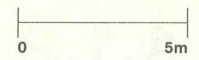
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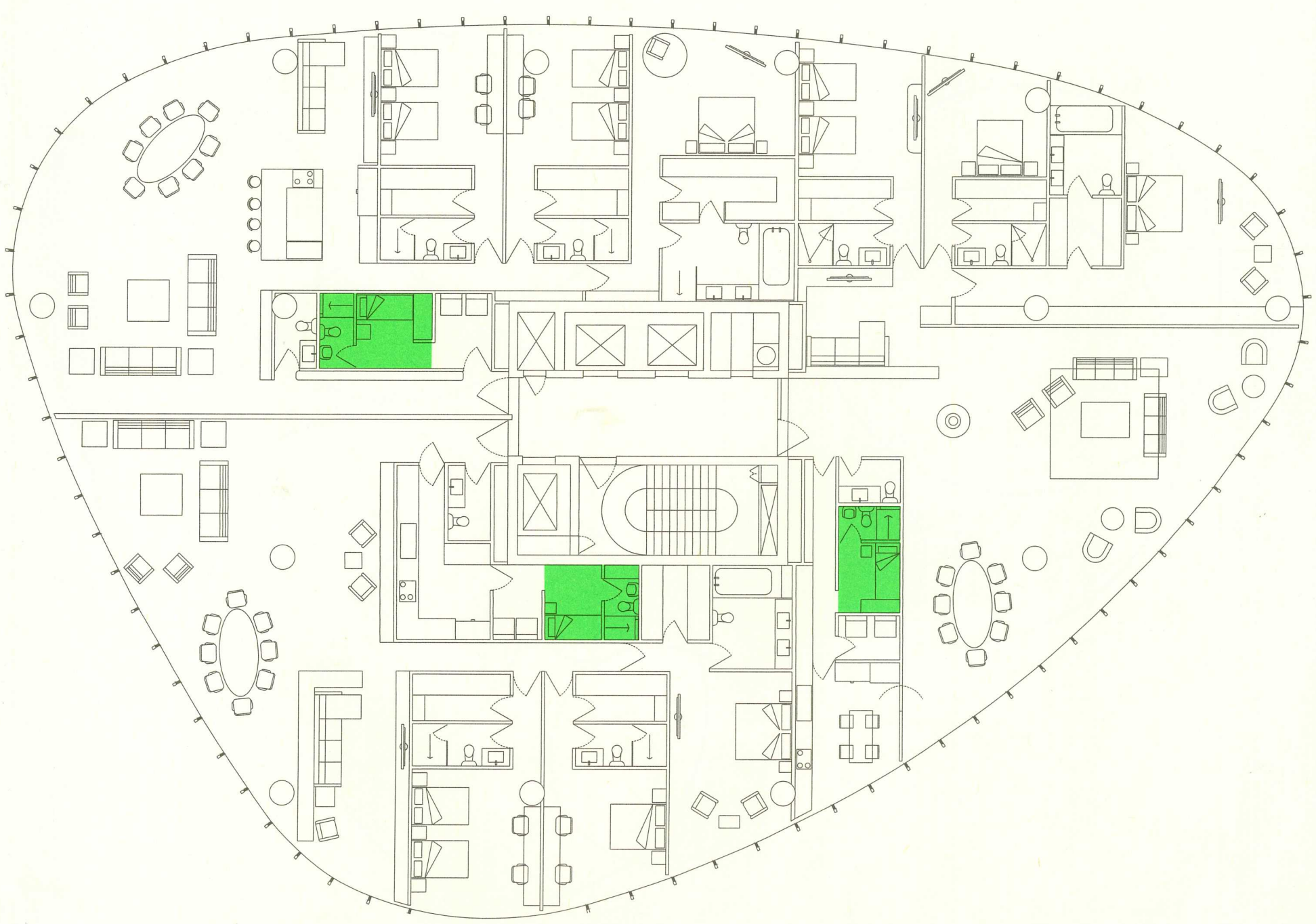
Typical floor plan
Annotated

Torre Cervantes
Fernando Romero

The building's tectonic structure allows for the free configuration of dividing walls among the apartments. The apartments are accessed via the hallway that leads to the elevators in the middle of the building. In each apartment, the kitchen and service area are located to one side of the access, which means that the finishing touches, visually speaking, are the large picture windows set into the façade in the living room/ dining area. Another hallway leads to each of the three bedrooms, all of which contain private bathrooms without artificial lighting.


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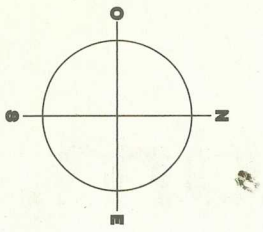


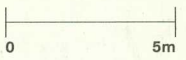
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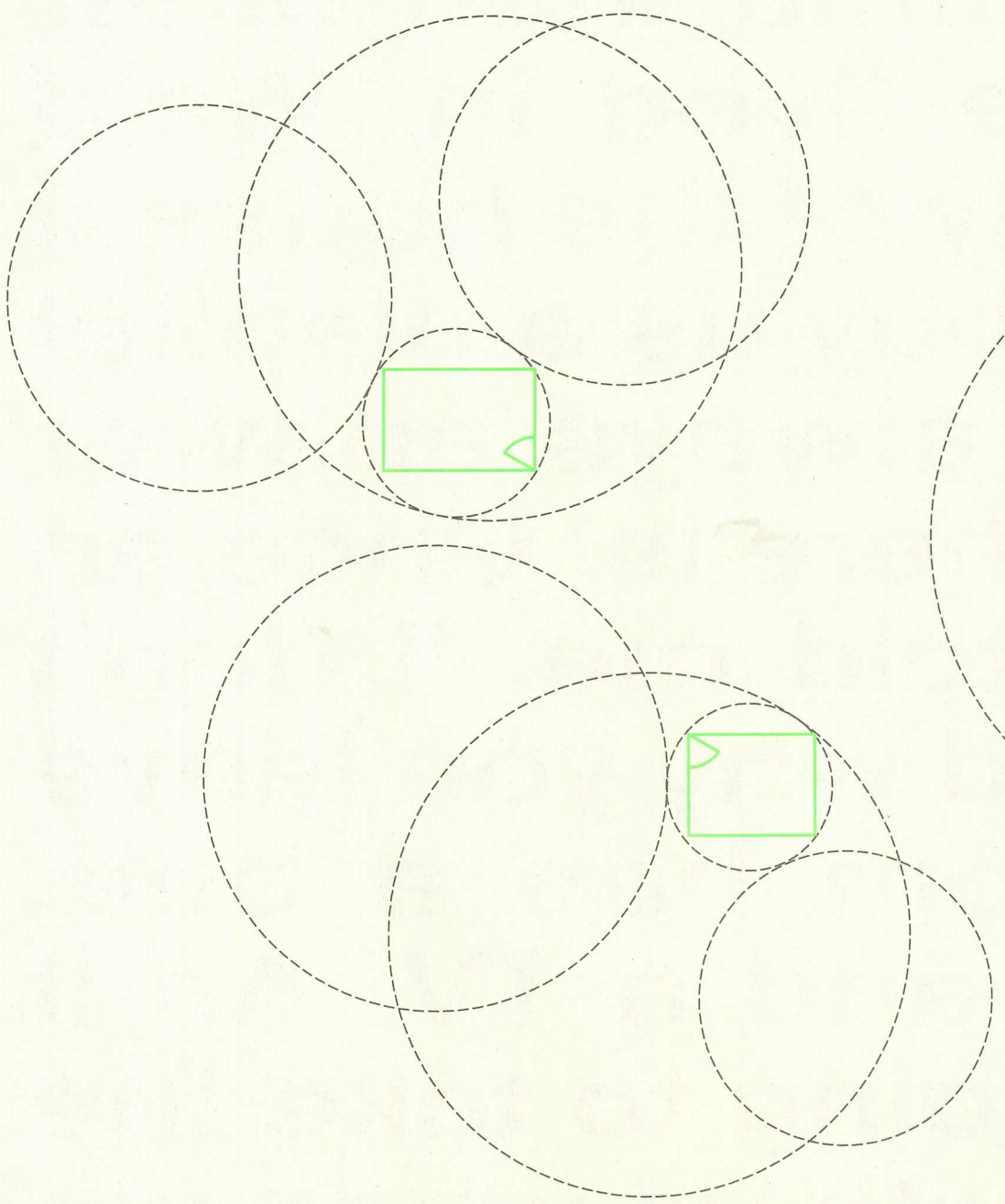
Typical floor plan
Orbits

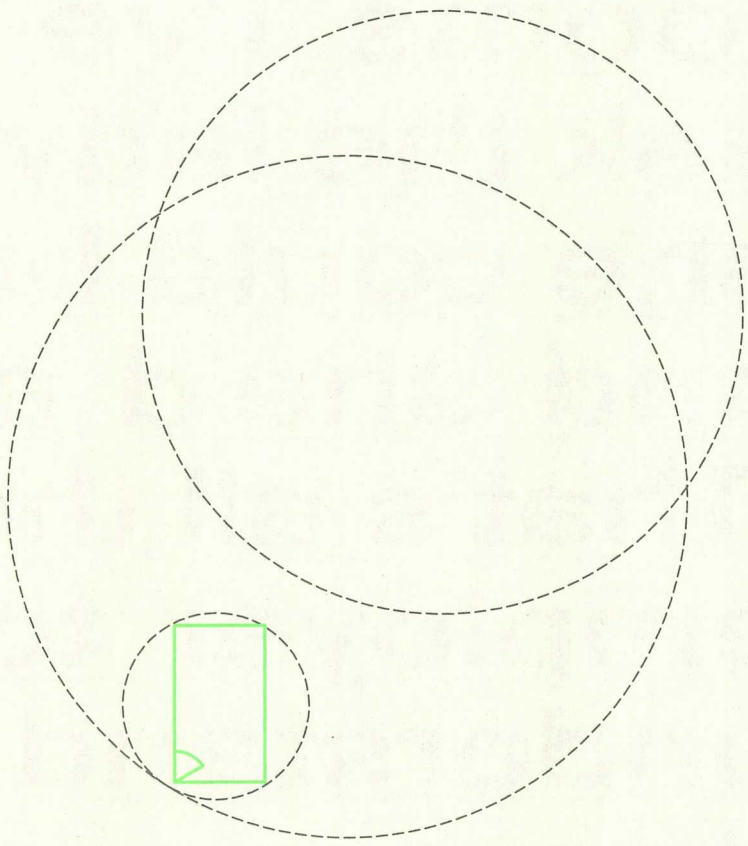
Torre Cervantes
Fernando Romero

The entire service block is concentrated in the center of the building, so as to maintain unobstructed views for the living spaces, apartment bedrooms, and offices. The spaces reserved for domestic staff also obey this logic: their quarters are designed without ventilation or natural light. Each such space is located at a depth of three or four rooms from the residents' living areas. As a result, the service bedroom is nearly invisible to the residents, despite its physical proximity to the other rooms in the house. In most cases, the route that leads to these spaces begins with a door or hallway a few meters from the main entrance, in such a way that the employee doesn't have to travel through any part of the house to reach her bedroom.


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Voices Spinning Off from the Orbits

"I do like my current room, although there's a problem with the layout. It's downstairs, right next to the laundry room, and it's not very well lit. But at least it's less humid than other rooms I've lived in. We'd ask the lady of the house if she could buy us a blanket and she'd always answer 'That's all there is.' Once an employer told me, 'I don't understand why you leave if your room has a bed, electricity, and a TV.' As if we were going to take the bedroom with us when we left, as if a bed and a TV set could make up for the abusive treatment."

Testimonials from Three Domestic Workers

MAURICIO PATRÓN

We experience architecture by inhabiting it. What kinds of labor orbits do live-in domestic workers inhabit? Emilia, Silvia, and Lourdes disrupt the invisibility that characterizes one of Mexico's largest informal economic sectors. If these workers were unionized, they would outnumber the Mexican teachers' union—the largest in Latin America. There are 2.4 million such domestic workers, slightly over 10% of whom are considered de planta, which means they live where they work. These three women work in Mexico City, where they share their homes and their labor. They serve breakfast and family meals; they cut the second slice of every birthday cakes; they endure, on the other side of their bedroom doors, the racket of parties they haven't been invited to; they're present at the births and deaths of the family members they work for.

Thanks to radio programs and ads in the news, the women found their way to the Sindicato Nacional de Trabajadores y Trabajadoras del Hogar [National Union of Domestic Workers], created just three years ago. They came because they wanted better working conditions, because they suspected that the treatment they received in early jobs wasn't normal. At the union, they met other women who thought the same. Though they live in houses measuring hundreds of square meters, domestic workers have the right to be visible in only a few of them [Frida's red rooms]: their living quarters, certain hallways, and maintenance areas such as garages, staircases, closets, laundry rooms, and kitchens. In the spaces where the architecture flaunts itself, though these women travel centimeter by centimeter, invisible during working hours. Other, broader orbits correspond to the geographies of their lives. Their transitions between the workers' quarters and the rest of the house are analogous to the commutes they make from their own neighborhoods and towns to the areas where they work.

Silvia, Lourdes, and Emilia reflect on their circumstances through their bodies, their stories, and the companionship of their co-workers. In this way, now-organized domestic workers in Mexico recently achieved an important victory in the Supreme Court: the Instituto Mexicano del Seguro Social [National Institute of Social Insurance] is now required to recognize and incorporate them as formal workers. They continue to fight for this success to become a reality, advocating for an inclusive reform of the Ley Federal de Trabajo [Federal Labor Law, currently in progress]. They fight, too, for the ratification and application of Convention 189 on Domestic Workers, issued by the International Labor Organization. Through their efforts, the systematic discrimination against them has become an intersectional question about how we inhabit our country and who works to maintain it.

On the first day we are permitted front doors, but after that we're supposed to use the back.

—Margaret Atwood

Lourdes Hernández Hernández

San Miguel Topilejo
Mexico City
Age 28

I only lasted three months commuting to work. I couldn't stand the hours and the traffic. I was living in Topilejo and the house was in Águilas; it took me about three hours to get there, even longer in the evening. Since then, I've always worked as live-in help. I started a new job about three months ago, also in Las Águilas, and now I live in San Pedro Mártir. I have Saturdays and Sundays off, which means I leave work at three and can come back on Monday. But the traffic crazy, so I come back on Sunday night to avoid it.

I've worked in eight households and had seven bedrooms. If I spread my arms in the smallest one, I could touch the walls; there was no sink in the bathroom and I had to brush my teeth in the laundry basin. At my previous job, my bedroom was the guestroom. That was the best one so far. But I've also had to stay outside the house, on the other side of the garden.

I do like my current room, although there's a problem with the layout. It's downstairs, right next to the laundry room, and it's not very well lit, even though it has two windows. But at least it's less humid than other rooms I've lived in. I used to have a bigger room, but it was much damper and colder. We'd ask the lady of the house if she could buy us a blanket and she'd always answer "That's all there is." Even if I wore warm pajamas, it wasn't enough.

Once an employer told me, "I don't understand why you leave if your room has a bed, electricity, and a TV." As if we were going to take the bedroom with us when we left, as if a bed and a TV set could make up for the abusive treatment.

The house where I live now is made completely of wood and a little ceramic, but the workers' room is made of other materials. Yu can tell the class difference even inside the same structure. Sometimes not even the door works properly, or the closet, and sometimes there's no furniture at all. In one room, we had a luxury closet, but we could only hang up our clothes because the drawers were full of the kids' clothing.

My sisters have this job, too, both of them. And so does my mom. It's a pattern that repeats itself in this line of work; it gets passed down. Lots of workers pass down their jobs this way: when one gets tired, because she's aging or a co-worker leaves, and the employer asks for someone else, well, who else but her own teenage daughter? It's very normal to suggest this to the lady of the house as a way of earning extra income. It's a job that gets passed down through the generations.

I make 1800 pesos a week, which we could say is decent within the pay range; at the last house, I earned 1600. I have a good relationship with my employers and I hope that doesn't change. I feel like they're aware of my rights and flexible about my hours. She [my boss] gave me my days off without my having to ask. The food is also an advantage, because if I commuted to work I'd only get one meal a day and I'd have to cook in my free time for the next day or for the whole week. They also gave me a bonus that was proportional to the three months I've been working here.

I don't have a contract. We still haven't talked about vacation days, but I've never had a job with vacation days as such. They don't give me benefits, but if I feel sick, they pay for

my medical appointments. They're okay with the fact that I'm in the Union; they say, "It's cool that you're there, but no contract." I'm not sure if they're afraid to sign it. I'm the Secretary of National and International Relations at the Union, and I'm trying to make sure that both jobs work out well. In my room I have my computer (although it barely works) and a little table.

Emilia Orihuela Gómez

San José Villa de Allende
Mexico State
Age 54

My mother taught me how to do my job and I'm very grateful to her. She got me a position in the same household where my sister works, in the Avante neighborhood. I was in fifth grade. That's as far as I got in school; I stopped to support my family. I remember that I had to stand on a soda crate to use the stove and our bedroom was full of newspapers. I shared the bed and the bathroom with my sister, and my mom was the one who collected our wages. I was 16 or 17 when I first realized I had a paying job. I had no days off or anything like that. We'd only go out for Sunday mass; that was it. I'm from San José Villa de Allende, Mexico State, but when I was very young I moved to Neza, in Ayotla, Ixtapaluca. You're always welcome in my house. I commuted to work then, but I didn't like it, because it took me half a day to go there and back.

Now I work in the Condesa neighborhood, in the house of the architect Teodoro González de León. My boss is his widow, Eugenia Sarre. It's a two-story house and we [my co-worker Sandra Luz Rencillas, age 60, and I] are on the second floor, which is separate from the rest of the house, although it's not like we're all the way off in the farthest corner, either. My co-worker and I use the same entrance, which is the front door, and then there's a staircase that goes directly up to our rooms, in case we don't want to cut across the house. My bedroom is well lit and it has a glass door so I can go out and hang up the laundry. The bedrooms are very comfortable. I share the bathroom with my co-worker. No complaints. I have a twin-size bed. I was getting very tired after six years of working there, because the mattress was old. So they bought new ones and the architect came upstairs to make sure everything was in order. They also bought us some armchairs so we could rest during the day. Except for that day, no one ever comes upstairs; we have our privacy. I told him once, "Sir, I'm grateful for these rooms of ours. You really thought of everything." And he said, "That's the idea; it's important for you to have your privacy." The best part is the view. When I go up to the roof terrace, I can see the buildings and the moon.

Teodoro, the architect, passed away a few years ago on September 16, at 4:30 in the morning. He died of a heart attack in bed. His wife said, "Emilia, my husband won't wake up. I've been trying to wake him for half an hour," and I went to check and he was cold. I leaned in to listen to his heartbeat. He'd had green enchiladas for dinner the night before. It was really hard. Lots of things changed; we never imagined this would happen. I decided to stay. On the anniversary of his death, I fill the house with white roses, because he liked them. I leave every two weeks on Fridays, Saturdays, and Sundays. Sometimes I indulge in a taxi and my daughter pays on the way back. We share it; she's a housekeeper in Polanco. We pay 350 pesos for the trip and it takes under an hour at noon, when there's no traffic. I was under a lot more pressure before, because I had to be at work for breakfast at 7 a.m. on Monday mornings. But then I told the lady of the house that it was better for me to start on Mondays at 12.

My boss doesn't want to sign a contract, and I haven't wanted to press her, because I feel like she's going to think I want to sue her. She pays for everything I need, plus a bonus, and she makes sure my health issues are attended to, my sugar levels. I earned 1600 pesos when I started off and now my salary is almost 4000 per week. I do go to the Union, although not always, and I pay my dues…I have a lot of respect for the women on the general committee. I see that my daughter [María de la Luz Padua Orihuela, General Secretary of the Council] fights hard and I'm proud.

I like wearing my uniform. I have it custom-made. On the weekends I don't have off, I have half of Sunday afternoon free, and I usually go take a walk to look at the other houses where I've worked.

Silvia Lázaro Cruz

Nochixtlán
Oaxaca
Age 33

I'm the single mother of a ten-year-old girl and I've doing household work for 21 years. I used to commute to work from my town. I stated when I was 12. I came to the city to work as live-in help when I was 17. At first I worked for a man who was a real perfectionist; it was a lot of pressure. And then I switched to this apartment on Cerrada de Bezares in the Bosque de las Lomas neighborhood.

My aunt, my father's sister, lives in Neza, and when I came to the city, she took me in. Although I've always been a live-in worker, because otherwise I'd have a two-and-a-half-hour commute there every day. I have time off once a week or every two weeks, depending on whether they [my employers] go away for the weekend. And I get my vacation days when they travel: in December, during Holy Week, and over the summer. There are two of us live-in employees. My co-worker [Guadalupe Rincón Cruz, age 38] cooks and I do the bedrooms, but we help each other out. For example, in the morning, we both make breakfast and lunch and all that, and we take the dog out early, which is like having another kid.

I've been working as a nanny ever since I got here. They always trusted me with the kids and I was with them a hundred percent of the time. The youngest daughter was four months old when I started and now she's 13. I practically raised all three of them. When I had my daughter, I asked my boss if she could live with me and she said no because the house isn't big enough. The room we sleep in is very small, so I haven't been lucky enough to live with her.

There are two entrances to the apartment: a front door and another doorway into the laundry room, which has one door that leads to our bedroom and another one to the kitchen. There are two twin-size beds in the bedroom with a little dresser between them, and across from the beds there's another piece of furniture with a TV on it. I leave on weekends and I don't keep my things here, but my co-worker is from Querétaro and she does keep everything at the house. Also, they [our employers] gave us things they didn't need anymore, furniture, pillows, sheets that used to belong to the kids. My favorite thing about the bedroom is my bed. When I'm really tired, I lie down and I'm out.

Another inconvenient thing about the room is the drop ceiling, which has sort of a window that looks out onto a hallway where they turn the lights on and off all the time. You can hear everything if there's a party, and also my modem blinks, which makes it hard to rest, and it bothers my co-worker because she gets migraines. The other window looks out onto the garage and the cars make a lot of noise. The family has their wooden shutters and everything, but we don't. Since we're both from small villages, we think our bathroom is the best, because we'd never had a bathroom attached to our bedrooms before and so we try to keep it clean. It isn't really private, but at night we just close the door and that's that. We can't leave the bedroom door open because the dog pees there and the lady of the house, well, she says it's no big deal. When we take out the dog, we can't use the elevator because she says it smells bad, so we go up and down the stairs four times a day. I know it by heart: 763 stairs per day. When they're all in bed, the dog sleeps with us.

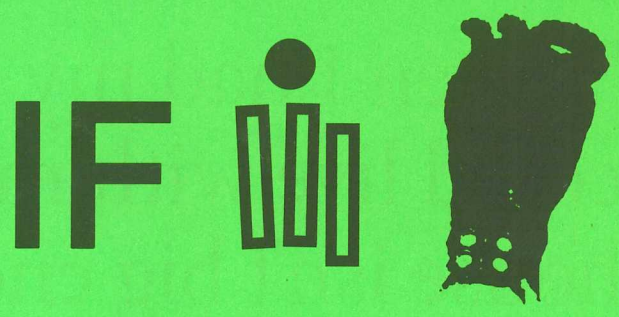
When I got here, I didn't have much self-worth; there were lots of things I didn't agree with, but I didn't say anything. Now that we know about our rights, they can't do whatever they want to us anymore. Before, we'd get paid on the 15th and the 30th of every month. But I've spoken up over time about what I didn't like, and so I got them to pay us every week and give us more days off. I don't have a contract or benefits and I earn 10,000 pesos a month. I've talked to them about signing a contract, and about my right to benefits. This year has been all about those issues. But they drag their feet and avoid the subject.

At first, in some households, I saw things I thought were very unfair, like how they'd separate the dishes and glasses we used. I thought that couldn't be normal. I started looking into it, and one day I saw information about the Union on TV. I called, and I went to a workshop that same Sunday. I've been a Union member for a year and a half and it's the best thing that's ever happened to me. It helped me realize that there were more things out there for me to accomplish. For example, in a month I'm going to get my middle school certificate from the INEA [Instituto Nacional para la Educación de los Adultos, or National Institute of Adult Education], and I'm learning more so I can take take my high school equivalency exam.

news:

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SPECULATIONS
ABOUT
DIFFICULT
OBJECTS



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We extend warmest
thanks to our friends:
Guillem Serrahima
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news: series is edited by
instituto de investigaciones
independientes and
published by
Gato Negro Ediciones
and IF Publications

news: is a series of publications dedicated to practice-based research by artists, architects, educators, scientists, scholars, and writers. We publish ongoing investigations committed to reading material records of the present, the histories they enfold, and the futures that haunt them.

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Each publication is the result of a collaborative process that involves authors, editors, and graphic designers.

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Gato Negro Ediciones
Jalapa 51-803
Roma Norte
06700 Mexico City
www.gatonegro.ninja

978-607-97969-7-6

Printed and bound in Mexico
at Offset Santiago
Gral. Pedro Antonio
de Los Santos 96,
San Miguel Chapultepec,
Mexico City, CDMX
11850

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"When I had my daughter, I asked my boss if she could live with me and she said no because the house isn't big enough. The room we sleep in is very small, so I haven't been lucky enough to live with her." / "I like wearing my uniform. I have it custom-made. On the weekends I don't have off, I have half of Sunday afternoon free, and I usually go take a walk to look at the other houses where I've worked." / "We can't leave the bedroom door open because the dog pees there and the lady of the house, well, she says it's no big deal. When we take out the dog, we can't use the elevator because she says it smells bad, so we go up and down the stairs four times a day. I know it by heart: 763 stairs per day. When they're all in bed, the dog sleeps with us." / "Lots of workers pass down their jobs this way: when one gets tired, because she's aging or a co-worker leaves, and the employer asks for someone else, well, who else but her own teenage daughter?" –Voices spinning off from the orbits, testimonies of domestic workers.

Frida Escobedo's *Domestic Orbits* is a speculative essay of critical cartography that explores how the domestic space is configured around orbits of exclusion that shape the trajectories of domestic workers. How is the space articulated according to specific gendered, classist, and racist configurations of the social sphere? Organized through a series of case studies that range from the 1950s until today in Mexico City, *Domestic Orbits* looks at the different scales by which domestic labor is erased by architects and planners. It studies the architectural plans of five well known projects from a perspective that aims highlight the social and economic relationships involved. In that sense, *Domestic Orbits* sketches a counter-history of modern architecture that questions the duality of the visible and invisible: those who count and those whose not.



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978-607-97969-7-6